

Medication Information for Youth

Methylphenidate—Methylin, Ritalin, Metadate, Concerta, Daytrana, Focalin

What the Medicine Is Called and What It Is For

The name of your medicine may be confusing. Most drugs have two names: 1) a scientific name that we call a *generic name* and 2) a trade or *brand name*. The generic name of this medicine is methylphenidate. There are a whole lot of different brand names in different forms: Ritalin, Metadate, Methylin, Concerta, Focalin, and Daytrana (a skin patch).

Although all of these medicines have methylphenidate as the active ingredient, they are made differently, so that there are many different ways to take methylphenidate. This helps the doctor to find just the right form of the medicine for each person.

Methylphenidate is called a *stimulant*. It is used to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD or ADD), whether the person has hyperactivity (increased moving around) or not. In people who have ADHD or ADD, parts of the brain are not working as well as they should. An example is the part that controls impulsive actions (“the brakes”). Methylphenidate helps these parts of the brain work better. The medicine can help you pay attention at school and at home. It can make it easier for you to listen to and follow directions, to finish more of your schoolwork and homework with fewer mistakes, to think before you act, to sit still for longer periods, and to get into less trouble with adults or other kids.

How You Take the Medicine

Each of these medicines works for a certain length of time. Your doctor will tell you what times of the day to take the medicine. It is very important that you take it just that way. Sometimes this is at breakfast, lunch, and after school. Long-acting forms may be taken only once a day. Some kids take medicine only on school days, and others take it every day.

Do not skip doses or take extra medicine without asking an adult. If you forget a dose, ask your parent(s) what to do.

Your doctor may talk with you about times that you do not have to take your medicine, such as during school breaks, weekends, and vacations. This is different for each person, so talk to your doctor to be sure you understand this clearly.

This medicine is prescribed only for you. It should never be shared with anyone else.

Do not chew long-acting pills or capsules; you will get too much medicine all at once. If you are taking Concerta, be sure to swallow it with plenty of water.

Caffeine (coffee, tea, soft drinks) may increase the side effects of this medicine.

It is not a good idea to combine a stimulant medicine with cough or cold medicine because rapid pulse rate (heartbeat) or high blood pressure may develop. If a stuffy nose is really bad, it is better to use a nasal spray.

You do not have to tell others that you are taking this medicine, but it is not something you should feel ashamed or embarrassed about. Many young people are helped by stimulant medicines. This medicine is not habit-forming if taken as your doctor says, and you will not become “hooked” on it. It will not make you into a drug user or an addict. Myths (things that people may believe but that are not true) about these medicines usually are told by people who do not understand ADHD. You should talk to your doctor or nurse about any worries you may have.

It is important to remember that that this medicine cannot change you as a person. Successes that you have in your schoolwork or other areas are *your* achievements, not those of the medicine. The medicine cannot make you do anything; it helps you do what *you* want to do. It helps you to be yourself—only calmer, more efficient, more productive, and more successful.

How Your Doctor Will Follow Your Progress

Before giving you the medicine, your doctor or nurse will talk with you and your parent(s) and may measure your height, weight, heart rate (pulse), and blood pressure. Be sure to tell the doctor if you have had very fast or irregular heartbeat, chest pain, dizziness, fainting, shortness of breath, or severe tiredness, especially when exercising. Also tell the doctor if you have had motor or vocal tics (hard-to-control repeated movements or sounds).

Be sure to tell your doctor or nurse about any other medicines or supplements you are taking, including vitamins, herbs, or aids to weight loss or bodybuilding. Also be sure to tell the doctor or nurse if you are using alcohol or drugs. Because many medicines may affect babies, it is very important to tell the doctor if you might be pregnant or if you are at risk of becoming pregnant.

Your teachers may be asked to fill out a form about your grades and behavior in school. A psychologist may give you some tests to see how you learn best.

Most doctors have regular appointments with young people who are taking medicine. You should use these visits to share any concerns you may have about your medicine and to talk about if it has helped you. From time to time, your physician or nurse will measure your height, weight, heart rate (pulse), and blood pressure to be sure that you are in good health while you are taking the medicine. Your doctor also will ask for regular reports from your parents and maybe from your teachers (with your permission) to see how well the medicine is working.

It is hard to say how long you will need to take this medicine. It is sometimes helpful to people even when they go to college and as they become adults. Your doctor will make that decision with you as he or she watches your progress.

How the Medicine Might Affect You

In addition to the ways the medicine can help you, it may have other effects called *side effects*. Different medicines have different side effects. It is helpful to know about some of the most common side effects of your medicine so that you will understand what they are if they happen. Some people do not have any side effects. Some side effects are just uncomfortable, but others may mean a more serious problem with the medicine. Side effects are most common after starting the medicine or after a dose increase. They may go away with time, or the medicine can be adjusted or changed—ask the doctor.

You could have an allergy to any medicine, which might show up as a rash on your skin, swelling, itching, or trouble breathing. With methylphenidate, the rash happens more often under the skin patch.

Please tell your parent(s) and your doctor or nurse about any changes that you notice after taking the medicine. It is especially important to tell a responsible adult if you are feeling depressed or that you may not want to live; if you have thoughts of hurting yourself; or if you begin to feel more irritable, nervous, or restless.

You may have more trouble getting to sleep at night or suddenly have more energy when it is time to go to bed. Your doctor can help you with this problem by changing the time of day that you take your last dose of medicine.

You may not be as hungry as you used to be, and you may not want to eat at mealtimes. Try to eat a good breakfast before taking your medicine. Try to eat something at lunchtime. You also may be more hungry in the evening and want a snack after supper. Eating regularly will help prevent stomachaches and headaches, which are other side effects that some people have. If these feelings do not get better, talk to your doctor. He or she may help you work out a plan to eat many small meals during the day or change the dose of the medicine.

If you are taking Concerta, you may notice the shell of the tablet in your bowel movement. This is harmless.

You may feel slower than usual during the day, especially during the first few weeks that you are taking the medicine. This does not mean that you are sick. It is best to do the things you usually do, including sports. This medicine will not hurt your sports ability. Exercising during the day will help you sleep better at night.

If you notice repeated movements of your muscles or your body or that you are making sounds over and over again that are hard to stop (“tics”), be sure to tell your parent(s) and doctor. This effect is very uncommon and can be helped by adjusting, stopping, or changing your medicine, but your doctor should make this decision.

Tell your parent(s) and the doctor **right away** if you start seeing, hearing, or feeling unusual things or if you have very fast or irregular heartbeat, chest pain, dizziness, fainting, shortness of breath, or severe tiredness, especially when exercising.

If you feel sad or that nothing is fun for more than a few days or if you start hearing or seeing unusual things, be sure to tell your parent(s) or your doctor.

It is very important not to drink alcohol or use marijuana or street drugs. These could make your ADHD problems worse or increase the side effects of this medicine.

Notes

Use this space to take notes or to write down questions you want to ask the doctor or nurse.

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From Dulcan MK (editor): *Helping Parents, Youth, and Teachers Understand Medications for Behavioral and Emotional Problems: A Resource Book of Medication Information Handouts*, Third Edition. Washington, DC, American Psychiatric Publishing, 2007