

BHIPP BULLETIN

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IT'S SUMMERTIME! ADHD AND "DRUG HOLIDAYS"

Parents of children who take stimulant medication for ADHD often wonder whether their kids should take a "drug holiday" (or a deliberate, temporary suspension of medication) during the summer months.

Since children with ADHD may not need to perform academically during the summer or on extended holidays, parents wary of side effects often seize the opportunity to take kids off their regular stimulant regimen. Other parents may prefer not to have an interruption for fear that their children's behavioral problems will rebound. Given that not all cases of ADHD persist, sometimes a drug holiday may be indicated in order to evaluate a child's progress and determine if medication treatment is still indicated.

What are the arguments for and against taking a "drug holiday?"

For: A break from side effects. Some studies show that long term treatment with stimulants can suppress growth (in part mediated by appetite suppression), effects seem to be dose dependent and most notable earlier in treatment, with attenuation of effects over time. The clinical significance of growth suppression is debated. Some studies indicate that drug holidays can attenuate the effect of stimulants on growth suppression, though this is not conclusive. A recent review indicated that short breaks from medication (i.e.; weekend "holidays") could decrease side effects such as insomnia and appetite suppression, without increasing symptoms of ADHD.

Against: While in occasional cases symptoms of ADHD may primarily impact children in the classroom, in many cases, ADHD treatment can help with symptoms outside of the classroom. For some, medication can help children function socially and effectively in summer activities such as camp, and poor functioning in these settings can significantly impact a child's self-esteem. In adolescents, consideration of other activities (i.e.; driving) in addition to school should be made. Generally, hyperactive or combined ADHD cases present the strongest case for continuing medication as behavioral problems resulting from going off medication can turn a holiday into a negative experience. Finally, taking a drug holiday may increase the likelihood that the patient discontinues taking the medication altogether, particularly in the case of adolescents.

The bottom line: Given the myriad of considerations mentioned above, holidays, both weekend and summer, should be decided on a case-by-case basis. The severity and impact of stimulant side effects should be weighed against the potential impact of non-treatment of symptoms and the particular constellation of symptoms that are prominent in an individual child. If a family feels strongly about taking a holiday, it may be worth the trial in order to maintain the treatment alliance.

-Dr. Rheanna Platt, BHIPP Consultant

References:

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Ibrahim K, Donyai P. Drug Holidays from ADHD Medication: International Experience Over the Past Four Decades. *Journal of Attention Disorders*, 2015 19(7): 551-68.

Vitiello, B. Understanding the Risk of Using Medications for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder with Respect to Physical Growth and Cardiovascular Function. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 2008 17(2): 459-474.

FROM THE BHIPP TOOLBOX



- Resources for parents:
[Child Mind Institute—ADHD—The Pros and Cons of a Drug Holiday](#)



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