

# Effects of Using Medication TIP Sheet

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## Targeting Symptoms:

Medication does not cure ASD. It can be used to treat specific symptoms that may be causing difficulty for your child or youth. It is important to understand and agree on which target symptom is being treated.

Some specific symptoms that may be affected by use of medication include (but are not limited to):

- **Hyperactivity:** This is often characterized by high activity level, restlessness, fidgeting, etc.
- **Short attention span**
- **Impulsivity:** This is often characterized as acting without thinking
- **Repeated thoughts:** This is often characterized by thinking about the same thing over and over
- **Sleep problems:** This can include either difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep
- **Anxiety:** This is often characterized by worrying too much or being overly fearful
- **Depression:** This is often characterized by ongoing sadness or low energy

## Medication can take time to be Effective:

Some medications take effect quickly, within minutes or hours, while some medications take a month or longer to show full effect. Consult with your health care provider to determine how long it will take to see an effect.

## Adjusting Dosages:

The dose (amount) of medication required for each child or youth can be different. Your health care provider will often start a medication at a low dose to ensure that your child tolerates the medication and to see if there is evidence of side effects. Monitoring of the target symptom allows for an objective discussion of the effectiveness of the medication and current dosage.

## Side Effects:

Side effects are negative or unwanted effects of a medicine. Sometimes, side effects may reduce or go away with a few days of starting a medication, or may last the whole time that the medication is being used or may become permanent. Some common side effects include:

- **Changes in sleep patterns.** This may include day time sleepiness, or night time wakefulness
- **Changes in appetite or weight.** This may include either an increase or decrease in the amount of food eaten, as well as weight loss or gain over time
- **Physical Symptoms** such as dry mouth, drooling, allergic reactions, muscle spasms, changes in mood or tremors may occur

Side effects should always be reviewed with your health care provider to see if they can be managed or require immediate treatment.



### Monitoring Effectiveness:

Medication of target symptoms requires ongoing monitoring to determine both need for medication, as well as to determine effectiveness. Monitoring can look at:

- Frequency of the target symptom: How many times did the symptom occur in a specific time frame? Examples may include: the number of tantrums per day or number of times the child or youth wakes each night.
- Severity of the target symptom considers how severe the symptom is. This can often be measured by rating scales. Examples may include: how hyperactive is the child or youth? Or how severe is the tantrum? Severity can be rated on a 3 or 5 point scale.
- Duration can be measured in how long a target symptom lasts from start to finish. Examples may include: how long did the tantrum last? Or how long did it take for the child or youth to fall asleep?

### Other Factors that can Influence Target Symptoms:

There are many factors that can contribute to changes in behaviour, and changes in target symptoms other than medication. Changes in life events can often make it harder to know if medication is effective or not. Some examples of life events may include: going to a new school, moving to a new house, birth of a sibling, changes in teachers or therapists, or illness, injury or death of a family member.

### Examples of Some Common Medications used in People with ASD:

- Stimulant medications: These can include, but are not limited to Ritalin, Adderall and Vyvance.
- Anti-Anxiety Medications: These can include, but are not limited to Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil.
- Second Generation / Atypical Antipsychotics: These can include, but are not limited to Risperdal, Zyprexa or Abilify.
- Hormones such as melatonin.

It is important to note that medications that are often prescribed for children and youth with autism are “off label”. This means that the medication that has been approved to treat specific conditions or age groups, but have not been specially tested or approved for the condition or age group being treated. Off-label prescribing is common and legal. However it is highly recommended that parents ask questions of their health care provider and ensure that their questions and concerns are addressed fully before committing to the use of medication.

## North East Ontario Autism Program

### Autism Speaks Toolkits

Autism Speaks Toolkits. Should my child take medicine for challenging behaviour? Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.org/science/resources-programs/autism-treatment-network/tools-you-can-use/medication-guide>

Autism Speaks Toolkits. Autism and Medication: Safe and Careful Use. Retrieved from <https://www.autismspeaks.ca/science-and-family-services/resources/tool-kits/autism-and-medicine-safe-and-careful-use1/>

