

# Medication Information for Parents and Teachers

## *Atomoxetine—Strattera*

### General Information About Medication

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Each child and adolescent is different. No one has exactly the same combination of medical and psychological problems. It is a good idea to talk with the doctor or nurse about the reasons a medicine is being used. It is very important to keep all appointments and to be in touch by telephone if you have concerns. It is important to communicate with the doctor, nurse, or therapist. An *advanced practice nurse* (APN) has additional education and training after becoming a registered nurse (RN). Your child's medication may be prescribed by a medical doctor (MD or DO) or an APN. In addition, a *physician assistant* (PA) working with a physician may prescribe certain medications. In this information sheet, "doctor" includes medical doctors as well as APNs and PAs who prescribe medication. Often a nurse (RN) will be part of the team and answer questions and give information.

It is very important that the medicine be taken exactly as the doctor instructs. However, once in a while, everyone forgets to give a medicine on time. It is a good idea to ask the doctor or nurse what to do if this happens. Do not stop or change a medicine without asking the doctor or nurse first.

If the medicine seems to stop working, it may be because it is not being taken regularly. The youth may be "cheeking" or hiding the medicine or forgetting to take it (especially at school). The doses may be too far apart or a different dose or medicine may be needed. Something at school, at home, or in the neighborhood may be upsetting the youth, or he or she may need special help for learning disabilities or tutoring. Please discuss your concerns with the doctor. **Do not just increase the dose.** It is also very important not to decrease the dose or stop the medicine without talking to the doctor first. The problem being treated may come back, or there could be uncomfortable or even dangerous results.

All medicines should be kept in a safe place, out of the reach of children, and should be supervised by an adult. If someone takes too much of a medicine, call the doctor, the poison control center, or a hospital emergency room.

Each medicine has a "generic" or chemical name. Just like laundry detergents or paper towels, some medicines are sold by more than one company under different brand names. The same medicine may be available under a generic name and several brand names. The generic medications are usually less expensive than the brand name ones. The generic medications have the same chemical formula, but they may or may not be exactly the same strength as the brand-name medications. Also, some brands of pills contain dye or other things that can cause allergic reactions. It is a good idea to talk to the doctor and the pharmacist about whether it is important to use a specific brand of medicine.

Any medicine can cause an allergic reaction. Examples are hives, itching, rashes, swelling, and trouble breathing. Even a tiny amount of a medicine can cause a reaction in patients who are allergic to that medicine. Be *sure* to talk to the doctor before restarting a medicine that has caused an allergic reaction and tell the doctor about any reactions to medicine that your child has had before.

**Taking more than one medicine at the same time may cause more side effects or cause one of the medicines to not work as well. Always ask the doctor, nurse, or pharmacist before adding another medicine, either prescription or bought without a prescription in a store or on the Internet. Be sure**

that each doctor knows about *all* of the medicines your child is taking. Also tell the doctor about any vitamins, herbal medicines, or supplements your child may be taking. Some of these may have side effects alone or when taken with this medication. It is a very good idea to keep a list with you of the names and doses of all medicines that your child is taking.

Everyone taking medicine should have a physical examination at least once a year.

If you think that your child may be using drugs or alcohol, please tell the doctor right away.

Pregnancy requires special care in the use of medicine. Some medicines can cause birth defects if taken by a pregnant mother. **Please tell the doctor immediately if you suspect the teenager is at risk of becoming pregnant.** The doctor may wish to discuss sexual behavior and/or birth control with your daughter.

Printed information like this applies to children and adolescents in general. If you have questions about the medicine, or if you notice changes or anything unusual, please ask the doctor or nurse. As scientific research advances, knowledge increases and advice changes. Even experts do not always agree. Many medicines have not been “approved” by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for use in children or use for particular problems. For this reason, use of the medicine for a problem or age group often is not listed in the *Physicians’ Desk Reference*. This does not necessarily mean that the medicine is dangerous or does not work, only that the company that makes the medicine has not received permission to advertise the medicine for use in children. Companies often do not apply for this permission because it is expensive to do the tests needed to apply for approval for use in children. Once a medication is approved by the FDA for any purpose, a doctor is allowed to prescribe it according to research and clinical experience.

## Note to Teachers

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It is a good idea to talk with the parent(s) about the reason(s) that a medication is being used. If the parent(s) sign consent to release information, it is often helpful for you to talk with the doctor. If the parent(s) give permission, the doctor may ask you to fill out rating forms about your experience with the student’s behavior, feelings, academic performance, and medication side effects. This information is very useful in selecting and monitoring medication treatment. If you have observations that you think are important, do not hesitate to share these with the student’s parent(s) and treating clinicians (with parental consent).

It is very important that the medicine be taken exactly as the doctor instructs. However, everyone forgets to give a medicine on time once in a while. It is a good idea to ask the parent(s) in advance what to do if this happens. Do not stop or change the time you are giving a medicine at school without parental permission. If a medication is to be taken with food, but lunchtime or snack time changes, be sure to notify the parent(s) so appropriate adjustments can be made.

All medicines should be kept in a secure place and should be supervised by an adult. If someone takes too much of a medicine, follow your school procedure for an urgent medical problem.

Taking medicine is a private matter and is best managed discreetly and confidentially. It is important to be sensitive to the student’s feelings about taking medicine.

If you suspect that the student is using drugs or alcohol, please tell the parent(s) or a school counselor right away.

Please tell the parent(s) or school nurse if you suspect medication side effects.

Modifications of the classroom environment or assignments may be useful in addition to medication. The student may need to be evaluated for additional help or a 504 plan or an Individualized Education Plan for learning problems or emotional or behavioral issues.

Any expression of suicidal thoughts or feelings or self-harm by a child or adolescent is a signal of distress and should be taken seriously. These behaviors should not be dismissed as “attention seeking.” School procedures for safety issues should be followed.

## What Is Atomoxetine (Strattera)?

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Atomoxetine is a medicine developed to treat attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children, adolescents, and adults. Atomoxetine is not a stimulant (like methylphenidate or amphetamine), and it works in a different way than the stimulant medicines. It is sometimes called a *selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor*.

## How Can This Medicine Help?

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Atomoxetine can increase attention and the ability to follow instructions. It can improve attention span, decrease distractibility, increase the ability to finish things, decrease hyperactivity, and improve the ability to think before acting (decrease impulsivity). Handwriting and completion of schoolwork and homework can improve. Atomoxetine can improve willingness to follow directions and decrease stubbornness in youngsters who have both ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). Atomoxetine can decrease depression (sadness) and anxiety (nervousness, worrying) in children with ADHD who have these emotional symptoms.

Medicine may not remove all symptoms in people with ADHD. Children may also need special help in school and behavior modification at home and at school. Some youngsters and families are helped by family therapy or group social skills therapy.

## How Does This Medicine Work?

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Atomoxetine helps certain parts of the brain that control impulsive actions (“the brakes”) work better by increasing the activity of the neurotransmitter *norepinephrine*. *Neurotransmitters* are the chemicals that the brain makes for the nerve cells to communicate with each other.

## How Long Does This Medicine Last?

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When given once or twice a day, atomoxetine works around the clock. It must be taken every day.

## How Will the Doctor Monitor This Medicine?

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The doctor will review your child’s medical history and physical examination before starting atomoxetine. The doctor or nurse may measure your child’s height, weight, pulse (heart rate), and blood pressure before starting atomoxetine. The doctor will usually ask parents and teachers to fill out behavior rating scales (checklists).

Unlike most medicines used for behavioral and emotional problems, the correct dose of atomoxetine depends on the youth’s weight. The doctor will start with a low dose and increase the dose over several weeks to a “target dose.” Often, atomoxetine is started in two divided doses—with breakfast and dinner—to decrease uncomfortable side effects. Once a person is used to the medicine, it can be given once a day, either with breakfast or with dinner. If daytime sleepiness is a problem, it can be given just before or at bedtime.

After the medicine is started, the doctor will want to have regular appointments with you and your child to see how the medicine is working, to see if a dose change is needed, to watch for side effects, to see if atomoxetine is still needed, and to see if any other treatment is needed. The doctor or nurse may check your

child's height, weight, pulse, and blood pressure. With parental permission, the doctor will usually ask for reports (rating scale, checklist, testing results, comments) from the teacher(s) to keep track of progress in learning and behavior.

## What Side Effects Can This Medicine Have?

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Any medicine can have side effects, including an allergy to the medicine. Because each patient is different, the doctor will monitor the youth closely, especially when the medicine is started. The doctor will work with you to increase the positive effects and decrease the negative effects of the medicine. Please tell the doctor if any of the listed side effects appear or if you think that the medicine is causing any other problems. Not all of the rare or unusual side effects are listed.

Side effects are most common after starting the medicine or after a dose increase. Many side effects can be avoided or lessened by starting with a very low dose and increasing it slowly—ask the doctor.

### Allergic Reaction

Tell the doctor in a day or two (if possible, before the next dose of medicine):

- Hives
- Itching
- Rash

Stop the medicine and get *immediate* medical care:

- Trouble breathing or chest tightness
- Swelling of lips, tongue, or throat

### Common Side Effects

If the following side effects do not go away after a week or two, ask the doctor about lowering your child's dose:

- Sedation, fatigue, sleepiness—These side effects can be helped by giving more of the medicine with dinner. Do not allow your child to drive, ride a bicycle or motorcycle, or operate machinery if this happens.
- Nausea, upset stomach, stomachache—These side effects can be helped by giving the medicine in two doses a day, with meals.
- Decreased appetite, mild weight loss
- Dizziness
- Headache

### Less Common Side Effects

Tell the doctor within a week or two:

- Rapid pulse rate (heartbeat)
- Increased blood pressure

- Motor tics (fast, repeated movements) or muscle twitches (jerking movements)
- Vomiting
- Irritability, jitteriness, nervousness
- Insomnia (trouble sleeping)
- Constipation—Encourage your child to drink more fluids and eat high-fiber foods; if necessary, the doctor may recommend a fiber medicine such as Benefiber or a stool softener such as Colace or mineral oil.
- Dry mouth

## Less Common, but More Serious, Side Effects

Call the doctor within a day or two:

- Increased aggression or hostility
- Increased moodiness
- Problems urinating (passing urine)

## Rare, but Serious, Side Effects

Call the doctor within a day:

- Any unusual change in behavior
- Thoughts of suicide or hurting himself or herself (very rare)
- Hurting himself or herself on purpose (very rare)
- Increased activity, agitation, rapid speech, feeling “speeded up,” decreased need for sleep, being very excited or irritable (cranky)—This is likely to be manic activation. It has been seen only in people who have bipolar disorder together with ADHD.
- Yellowing of skin or eyes, dark urine, pale bowel movements, abdominal pain or fullness, unexplained flu-like symptoms, itchy skin—These side effects are extremely rare but could be signs of liver damage.

*Boys only*

**Go to an emergency room *right away*:**

- Erection of the penis lasting more than 1 hour (also called *priapism*)—This may be painful and could cause permanent damage.

## Some Interactions With Other Medicines or Food

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*Please note that the following are only the most likely interactions with other medicines or food.*

Atomoxetine may be taken with food.

Caffeine may increase side effects.

Atomoxetine is safe to use together with a stimulant medication (methylphenidate or amphetamine) if neither type of medicine alone works well enough for your child.

Atomoxetine may increase the side effects of albuterol (Ventolin) inhalers; these side effects include palpitations, fast heart rate (pulse), and increased blood pressure.

When atomoxetine is taken together with fluoxetine (Prozac), paroxetine (Paxil), cimetidine (Tagamet), or bupropion (Wellbutrin), the dose of atomoxetine may need to be lowered.

**Atomoxetine should not be taken at the same time as or even within a month of taking another type of medicine called a *monoamine oxidase inhibitor* (MAOI), such as selegiline (Eldepryl), phenelzine (Nardil), tranylcypromine (Parnate), or isocarboxazid (Marplan). The combination could cause severe high blood pressure.**

## What Could Happen if This Medicine Is Stopped Suddenly?

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There are no known medical side effects from stopping atomoxetine suddenly. The symptoms of ADHD will gradually come back.

## How Long Will This Medicine Be Needed?

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There is no way to know how long a person will need to take atomoxetine. The parent(s), the doctor, and the school will work together to determine what is right for each patient. Sometimes the medicine is needed for a few years, but many people need to take medicine for ADHD even as adults.

## What Else Should I Know About This Medicine?

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Unlike stimulant medicines (methylphenidate or amphetamine), atomoxetine takes several weeks to work (although side effects may show up right away). The full positive effects of a certain dose of atomoxetine may not show for several months, so it helps to be patient.

It is important that the child swallow the capsule whole and not chew it or open it, because the liquid inside can burn the eyes or mouth.

The FDA has required that the label for atomoxetine include a warning regarding possible increased risk of suicidal thinking in children and adolescents being treated with this medicine. The risk of this is very low, but it is important to be careful.

## What Should a Parent Do?

1. Be honest with your child about possible risks and benefits of medicine.
2. Talk to your child about whether he or she is having any suicidal thoughts, and tell your child to come to you if he or she is having such thoughts.
3. You, your child, and your child's doctor or nurse should develop a safety plan. Pick adults whom your child can tell if he or she is thinking about suicide.
4. Be sure to tell your child's doctor, nurse, or therapist if you suspect that your child is using alcohol or drugs or if something has happened that might make your child feel worse, such as a family separation, breaking up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, someone close dying or attempting suicide, physical or sexual abuse, or failure in school.
5. Be sure that there are no guns in the home and that all medicines (including over-the-counter medicines like Tylenol) are closely supervised by an adult and kept in a safe place.
6. Watch for new or worse thoughts of suicide, self-harm, depression, anxiety (nerves), feeling very agitated



concerning drug dosages, schedules, routes of administration, and side effects is accurate as of the time of publication and consistent with standards set by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the general medical community and accepted child psychiatric practice. The information on this medication sheet does not cover all the possible uses, precautions, side effects, or interactions of this drug. For a complete listing of side effects, see the manufacturer's package insert, which can be obtained from your physician or pharmacist. As medical research and practice advance, therapeutic standards may change. For this reason and because human and mechanical errors sometimes occur, we recommend that readers follow the advice of a physician who is directly involved in their care or the care of a member of their family.

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