**Top Ten Things I Wish College Students with ADHD Knew About Their Medication When They Arrive On Campus**

**Patricia O. Quinn, M.D.**

**1**. **Know the name of your medication and how it works.**

Ritalin (methylphenidate), Dexedrine, Adderall (amphetamines), and Concerta or Vyvanse, Kayvay, and Strattera are all commonly prescribed medications for ADHD. Methylphenidate products and the amphetamines come as either short-acting (usually 4 hours) and longer-acting (6-12 hours) preparations. The shorter-acting medications take effect in 20 minutes while the longer acting ones may take up to an hour to be fully effective. Both of these medications work on correcting the neurobiochemistry of the brain, which is thought to be the cause of the symptoms seen in ADHD. These medications enhance brain receptor functioning, inhibit the breakdown of certain neurotransmitters in the brain, and themselves act as neurotransmitters.

**2.** **If you needed medication to concentrate in high school, you’ll most likely need medication to concentrate in college.**

Stimulants are the treatment of choice for ADHD. They increase concentration and focus while decreasing distractibility and impulsivity. Seventy (70) percent of individuals with ADD continue to have problems with attention throughout their lifespan. ADD does not go away!

**3. Stimulants improve cognitive functioning but you still have to put in time studying and attending classes.**

Taking medication before classes can help you concentrate on what is going on and enhances information gathering. You can also use your medication dosage times to establish a schedule for study. You should know how long your medicine will be effective and therefore determine how much focused study time you have available. Set up a schedule for studying accordingly.

Stimulants can also help you stay focused while you are reading and thus improve your reading comprehension. Students frequently report that they read all of the material but have no clue as to what they have just read because they weren't paying attention. To solve this problem be sure your stimulant medication is in effect while you are reading.

**4. ADHD affects all aspects of life - social, home, sports, and employment.**

You don't just need to concentrate in class you also need to focus on what your friends are saying or on instructions on the job. Focus and concentration are important in sports whether you are playing tennis or catching a football. Often being distracted and/or acting impulsively can get you into trouble with your friends or (when driving a car) with the law. It is important to assess how much the symptoms of ADHD are affecting your functioning and to take your medication accordingly. Improved concentration may improve the quality of your life in many ways.

**5. It is important to take medication as prescribed for you by your physician. Don't self-medicate.**

Many students have a mistaken notion that if one pill works well, two will work better - while that may be true for other medications, that is not the case for stimulants. Stimulant medications work best within a "window of efficacy." For each individual there is a dose of medication that is most effective. Higher or lower doses than your ideal dose will be less effective. The amount of medication you need does not depend on your body weight or on the severity of your symptoms but rather on what works for you. You should periodically reassess whether your medication is still functioning at optimum effectiveness. Many students come to college on the same dose of medication that worked for them in elementary or high school. That's fine if you've had a recent careful review of your needs and it's clear that the same dosage level continues to be most effective, but you shouldn't assume that the same dose continues to be most effective for you.

**6. It is illegal to distribute (share) your prescription medication.**

Stimulant medications are controlled substances. The law states that all medications should be kept in their original container and labeled with your name, name and dose of medication. It is important not to transfer your stimulant medication to another bottle for any reason. It is against the low for you to distribute a controlled substance. This means sharing your medication with a friend who needs to study for that big test or concentrate in class or a sport. Many students carry their medications with them at all times to avoid leaving them unattended in their rooms where they may be more accessible to others.

**7. Drugs and alcohol do not mix with stimulants.**

Your ADHD is caused by a chemical imbalance in your brain. You are taking stimulant medication to try to correct that imbalance. If you use other drugs such as marijuana, which also affect brain dopamine, you wreak havoc with an already imbalanced system. Your medications will not be as effective and you will be more impaired in your functioning. Taking stimulants also affects the metabolism of alcohol in the body and can result in higher blood alcohol levels and increase the risk of alcohol poisoning. Mixing cocaine and the stimulants can kill! Excessive caffeine (also a stimulant) intake can also make your nervous and jittery if you are on stimulant medications for your ADHD.

**8. Check-ups are important - Check in with the health center on campus when you arrive and monthly after that.**

As a controlled substance stimulant prescriptions need to be refilled monthly. When you arrive on campus it is important to visit the health center and set up a mechanism for you to receive your medication prescriptions regularly. If you depend on other systems they usually break down at some point and you may be left without medication usually at critical times like before a test or during study for finals. It's also important for the staff to become familiar with you so that if questions arise about dose or side effects they can answer them more readily. You can also have your weight checked monthly to make sure you are still eating enough calories and not losing weight because you are not hungry or forget to eat.

**9. Report any side effects that you experience promptly. Do not stop your medication on your own. Talk with someone about addressing these side effects.**

If your stimulant medication is proving to be effective and making a difference in your life there is no reason to stop it because of unpleasant side effects. It is important to report these side effects to the health care facility or your primary physician. Based on their experience they will usually have techniques for dealing with these side effects that you may not have thought of. Don't stop your medicine on your own. Do go to talk with someone about them. A change in medication or reduction in dose may be all that you need but let the professionals decide that course of action.

**10. See your primary physician at least once a year for an examination and blood tests.**

As with all chronic conditions and medications that are taken routinely, it is important to have a regular check-up. Blood tests that assess liver functioning are important. Your physician back home is likely the one that diagnosed your ADD (ADHD) and knows you the best. Be sure you check in with him or her to assess how things are going from time to time.