

Ask the Expert

Stimulant-Related Weight Loss in Children with ADHD

Question

How can I address psycho-stimulant-related weight loss in small children? Is it helpful to add a medication to stimulate appetite?

Response from Adelaide S. Robb, MD

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Loss of appetite is a frequent side effect of stimulants, but weight *loss* (rather than failure to gain weight) is less common. The first thing to do is to educate parents about when and what to feed young children who are taking stimulants and are losing weight. We encourage parents to pack in calories at the beginning and end of the day. This means a larger, high-calorie breakfast, after-school snack, dinner, and even a bedtime snack. Lunch is usually the time of least caloric intake for children treated with stimulants. Selecting high-calorie foods such as peanut butter, puddings, whole milk, cheese, and other calorie-dense foods will help to increase caloric intake. Children may also do better with smaller but more frequent meals, which also may allow for more calories. The use of high-calorie meal supplements such as *PediaSure* and *BOOST Plus* may also help to add both calories and vitamins/minerals. A consultation with a pediatric nutritionist will also educate parents about high-calorie options that are compatible with the child's dietary needs.

Using a medication to promote weight gain is not advised for patients with stimulant-associated weight loss. More frequently, we will lower the stimulant dose or switch medications. Some children do not need the medications on weekends or school holidays, and parents may give a stimulant "holiday" to improve a child's appetite and assist with weight recovery.