

LONG TERM RITALIN USE ON CHILDREN

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For a quarter of a century, Ritalin has been shadowed by the possibilities that the drug may permanently suppress the height or weight of children. That is not necessarily so, according to a new study in the Journal of the American Academy of Child Adolescent Psychiatry (June, 2000).

This study found that medicated individuals who had attained their final stature did not differ in average height or weight from family, community, or unmediated [people]. Most aspects of medication were not associated with adult height or weight.

Ritalin, a mind-altering stimulant, is the most heavily prescribed medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), a condition that affects about 4% to 6% of the U.S. population, children and adults alike. That figure goes up to about 12% when it only includes school-aged children. Common symptoms are being easily distracted, impulsive, hyper, and suffering from frequent frustration.

The researchers followed more than 100 boys from childhood to adulthood. Girls were not included in the study because of their different weight and height profiles. The boys, who were aged 4 to 12 years old at the beginning of the study, exhibited symptoms of ADHD and were treated with Ritalin for an average of three years. The study's participants were followed until between the ages of 21 and 23, and half of them were evaluated again between the ages of 28 and 32. Because their heights did not vary as adults, these researchers indicated that the data suggests the men had reached their "complete stature."

In all of those cases, the heights and weights were essentially the same, so it does not look as if there is a major difference between those Ritalin-treated boys and any of those comparison groups. However, two factors did account for a significant difference in height and weight at age 21. Nausea and vomiting, which can occur with higher doses of Ritalin, were associated with smaller stature in adulthood. If a study participant had initial nausea, they were predicted to be shorter at age 21 by an average of 2.6 inches; if they took high doses of the drug, they were predicted to be nine pounds lighter at 21.

These findings could translate to the doctor's office. It seems that boys with adverse side effects might be worth watching ... to follow their growth more carefully. Otherwise, parent's concern about long-term use of Ritalin was not found to be significant.