

# Low Appetite From Medications: Information for Parents and Caregivers



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**Summary:** Certain medications (especially stimulant medications for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) can reduce appetite. The good news is that there are many things that can be done to help with this.

## Introduction

Certain medications (especially stimulant medications for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) can reduce appetite.

## How Common is It?

About  $\frac{1}{3}$  of people that take stimulant medications report that they have reduced appetite. In most people, this effect is temporary and/or is not very significant. In some cases, this may be a good thing. In other cases, the loss of appetite can be a problem. The good news is that there are things that can be done to deal with this.

## Tips for Parents: Talking to Your Child About Reduced Appetite

Explain to your children that the medication can reduce appetite.

- You might say: “On one hand, the medicine helps you to focus better. On the other hand, it plays a trick on your brain -- It tricks your brain into thinking that you are not hungry, but you really are!”
- “Have you noticed that?” (to make it interactive and engage your child)
- “What happens to a car if you don’t feed it gas? (see if your child knows)
- “What happens to your body if you don’t feed it food and drinks?”
- “That’s right, your brain and body don’t work well. You might get cranky, tired, a headache or stomachache...”
- The good news is that there are some things we can try to keep your brain well-fueled.”

Problem-solve with your child. There are many strategies that parents can try, however, ask to see if your child has any brilliant ideas.

- “Do you have any ideas on what we can do to help you get more food into you?”

- “Any foods that you would prefer?”
- “Any times that would be better to have snacks or mealtime?” etc.

## Tips for Parents of Children with Reduced Appetite

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### Food Advice: When to Eat?

Have regular meal times, such as 8 AM, 12 PM, 5 PM.

Have 2-3 snack times, such as between meals, such as 10 AM, 2-3 PM, 7-8 PM. In this way, your child can have something every 2-3 hrs. Avoid snacks right after an unfinished meal, as it encourages them to skip their meal and just have snacks.

### Food Advice: What to Eat?

Offer foods that are high-calorie and healthy at the same time.

For an adult trying to lose weight, we might offer low-calorie foods (e.g. rice cakes, low-fat milk or yogurt) or high-fibre vegetables (e.g. celery sticks, etc.)

For a child trying to gain weight, we will instead want higher calorie foods (yet still healthy) such as whole-grain breads, high calorie vegetables such as sweet potatoes, etc. We can serve celery and carrots, but either serve them raw with a high-calorie dip such as mayonnaise or simply cook the celery and carrots in a soup to make them easier to digest.

Examples of healthy, high-calorie foods:

- Whole milk (rather than skim milk).
- High fat yogurt
- Cheese
- At snack time, consider salty snacks (e.g. salted nuts which are high calorie) which will make your child thirsty, then give them whole milk (as opposed to juice).

Do the classic culinary trick of adding butter, gravy, and grated cheese to food.

What about junk food and sweets?

- Do try to avoid junk food (e.g. chocolate bars, processed junk foods) as this runs the risk of setting up unhealthy dietary habits in the long run.

### Food Advice: How to Eat?

At mealtimes, give your child food first and any drinks later. Drinks will fill up your child’s stomach but have less calories.

Serve food in a way that it is easier to handle.

- Are you serving a sandwich? Cut it up into “finger food” portions or “hors-d’oeuvres” sized pieces.
- Are you serving a carrot? Cut up the carrot to make it easier to eat while having it with dip.

Is your ADHD child hyperactive at the meal table? Do they have trouble sitting still at the table? Do they need to shake their legs?

- If so, consider giving the child opportunities to move (as opposed to telling them to sit still). Allow them to move or fidget. Consider the ‘mobility seating’ options such as wedge cushions. Let them stand at the table. Ask them to fetch things for people, or do other helpful things.

What about eating in front of the TV while distracted?

- On one hand, some people would argue against “mindless” eating. On the other hand, if you have tried other strategies and nothing else works, then consider it.








Don’t get into stressful conflicts about eating. Is your child getting upset or stressed out about eating?

- Try to give them time and space to calm down. Instead of giving them a command, “You have to eat”, try

making a less pressuring comment, e.g. “Food is ready! It's always so much more delicious when its warm.”

Don't punish by denying them food.

## Sample Schedule / Meal Strategy for Child with Low Appetite from ADHD Medication

Morning		<p>Breakfast (before medication)</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes.</li> <li>• High-fat yogurt (rather than low fat yogurt).</li> <li>• High calorie granola.</li> </ul> <p>Refusing to eat solid foods?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider liquid breakfast (such as homemade smoothies; Breakfast Carnation Drink, Boost, etc.).</li> </ul>
		Medication (after breakfast)
Snack		<p>Healthy snack at school</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Yogurt, granola bar, etc.</li> </ul>
Lunch		<p>Serving a sandwich?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cut a standard sandwich bread into 4 pieces to make it seem smaller and less effort to eat.</li> </ul> <p>Ask the school to help monitor if lunch is being eaten, and encourage your child to eat before going out.</p>
After school snack		Healthy snack after school
Dinnertime		
After dinner snack		<p>Does your child get hungry after the medication wears off later in the evening?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Many parents report their child may have a “second supper” after the medication wears off.</li> <li>• Accept that you may need to reheat dinner for them at this time; or simply eat like many Europeans do, with a later 7-8 PM dinner.</li> </ul>

## Are There Still Problems from Low Appetite due to Medications?

If so, then speak to your health care provider about options.  
Consider seeing a registered dietician (RD) for a consultation to give ideas.

## About this Document

Written by the health professionals at CHEO and the University of Ottawa.

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