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Review Article

Long-Term Safety and Efficacy of Stimulant vs. Non-Stimulant Medications in ADHD Treatment: A Comparative Meta-Analysis Over Two Years

D. Amiri[1*], T.Eriksson[2]

[1]Specialist in Psychiatry and Social medicine, Uppsala, Sweden

[2]Chief Medical Officer, Addiction and neuropsychiatry Clinic at Akademiska Hospital, Uppsala, Sweden

[*]**Corresponding author:** Davoud Amiri, Specialist in psychiatry and social medicine, Uppsala, Sweden

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Abstract

This systematic review and meta-analysis synthesize results from numerous studies to assess the long-term effects of ADHD medications, focusing on stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamine, and nonstimulant treatments. The review gathers data from Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs) and observational studies with at least five years of follow-up, encompassing a substantial sample size from several international databases. The analysis confirms that pharmacotherapy for ADHD, which includes stimulants and non-stimulants, contributes to improved academic performance, social functioning, and reduces the risk of substance abuse and criminal behavior. While stimulants are highlighted for their effectiveness in symptom reduction and positive impact on social and academic outcomes, non-stimulants also demonstrate benefits, albeit with less consistency across studies. In addition, the research examines the comparative effectiveness and tolerability of these medications, noting that methylphenidate and amphetamine are generally the most effective, while clonidine, atomoxetine, and guanfacine are less so. Adverse effects, which vary by drug type, are recognized as important considerations, particularly in the context of comorbid tic disorders. The overall safety profile of these medications is considered acceptable, although stimulants are associated with a higher incidence of adverse events.

Keywords: ADHD; Long-term; Safety; Efficacy; CS; Non-CS

Background

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a widespread neurodevelopmental disorder manifesting as inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, affecting approximately 5% of children and more than 2.5% of adults worldwide. Its symptomatology often extends into adulthood, potentially leading to significant academic, social and vocational challenges. The conventional diagnostic paradigm, which is categorical, has been criticized for failing to capture the complexity and spectrum of ADHD presentations. Treatment methods for ADHD are diverse, with a strong emphasis on pharmacotherapy. Stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamines are the most widely used drugs, targeting neurotransmitter activity in the brain to relieve symptoms [1,2]. Nonstimulants, including atomoxetine and guanfacine, offer alternative mechanisms of action and are often considered when stimulant side effects are pronounced or in comorbidities, such as tic disorders. Over time, large-scale studies have highlighted the multifaceted nature of ADHD, revealing a range of comorbid psychiatric disorders and neurocognitive impairments. These studies have also informed the development of various treatment strategies, and highlighted the importance of personalized approaches to effectively manage the disease. The long-term effects of ADHD treatments, particularly in terms of self-esteem and social functioning, are critical areas for investigation. Recent updates of Cochrane Reviews and other systematic reviews have underlined the importance of long-term management strategies, which have shown favorable results in improving self-esteem and social integration among individuals with ADHD. However, the need for ongoing research remains, to deepen the understanding of the long-term effects of both stimulant

and non-stimulant medications on ADHD and to refine treatment approaches for better patient outcomes. In summary, ADHD is a complex disorder with varying presentations and outcomes. While pharmacotherapy remains a cornerstone of treatment, providing significant benefits, ongoing research is imperative to improve long-term care and management of individuals with ADHD [3-6].

Objective

This review synthesizes results from different studies to assess the long-term impact of ADHD on self-esteem and social functioning and to evaluate the comparative effectiveness and safety of stimulant and non-stimulant drugs used in treatment. Using outcome measures such as Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Rating Scale-IV (ADHD-RS-IV), this study aims to understand the nuanced effects of different medication types across different ADHD subtypes, including inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity. The overall goal is to determine how both treated and untreated ADHD affect long-term outcomes in individuals, with a particular focus on self-esteem and social functioning, and to discern the lasting effects of pharmacological interventions in children and adolescents with ADHD.

Methods

In an attempt to synthesize a range of studies into a coherent account of the methods applied in ADHD research, this article presents a comprehensive review and analysis of research spanning three decades. Researchers carefully searched 12 databases, including PubMed, Scopus, and PsycINFO, as well as consulting trial registries and experts to unearth both published and unpublished studies up to September 2018, with a particular focus on those that provide insights into long-term outcomes for those with ADHD. The methodological rigor of this meta-analysis is evident in the inclusion of 101 Randomized Controlled Trials (RCTs), carefully selected for their focus on the comparative effectiveness and safety of ADHD medications for a demographic age 6 to 18 years. The spectrum of drugs analyzed includes widely recognized stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamine, along with non-stimulants such as Atomoxetine and Bupropion, and treatments such as clonidine and guanfacine.

Data extraction from these studies adhered to strict criteria, which ensured that design, participant characteristics, drug types and doses and length of follow-up were consistently reported. This made it possible to calculate Odds Ratios (ORs) and Mean Differences (MDs) to measure the effect of ADHD pharmacotherapy on outcomes such as academic performance, employment, drug use, delinquency or quality of life [7].

In addition, the research included a dual assessment of ADHD-RS-IV total score and subtypes-namely, inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity-while accounting for Treatment-Emergent Adverse Events (TEAEs) and secondary physiological outcomes such as blood pressure and heart rate. An additional layer of analysis considered the heterogeneity of ADHD and the prospects for developmental precision psychiatry, where the authors advocated for a nuanced understanding of the complexity of the disorder. The synthesis of these data, achieved through the application of random-effects models for RCTs and fixed-effects models for observational studies, culminated in a nuanced understanding of the long-term effects of both stimulant and non-stimulant medications on individuals with ADHD. This included an exploration of how these drugs interact with the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), as demonstrated by parameters such as Heart Rate Variability (HRV), Electrodermal Activity (EDA), and pupil diameter. In conclusion, this synthesis not only highlights advances in ADHD treatment efficacy and safety, but also highlights the critical need for ongoing research, particularly regarding long-term effects and the broader physiological effects of ADHD medications [8].

Result

The synthesis of ADHD research findings offers a compelling look at the long-term consequences of untreated versus treated ADHD on self-esteem and social functioning. Individuals with untreated ADHD typically experienced unfavorable outcomes, with over half exhibiting lower self-esteem and nearly three-quarters experiencing impaired social functioning relative to non-ADHD counterparts. while those with ADHD who underwent pharmacological treatment showed significant improvements in these domains. Drug efficacy and safety were central to this analysis, which included a range of drugs such as methylphenidate, amphetamine, atomoxetine, bupropion, clonidine and guanfacine. Stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamines were found to be particularly effective, albeit with a profile of common side effects such as decreased appetite, insomnia, irritability and tics. Non-stimulants were associated with gastrointestinal problems and less common side effects such as headache and dizziness.

The choice of medication is underscored as a deeply individualized decision, balancing efficacy and safety with patient and caregiver preferences. Long-term considerations remain pivotal, as data beyond short-term studies are limited, and ongoing research is vital for a clearer understanding of the medications' effects on growth, development, and general health. Meta-analyses reinforced the positive long-term outcomes of pharmacotherapy, with significant improvements in academic achievement and employment prospects, coupled with a reduced risk of substance abuse. The importance of close monitoring is underscored by the different tolerability and side effect profiles of both stimulant and nonstimulant long-acting ADHD drugs. As the field recognizes the complexities of ADHD, developmental psychiatry is coming to the fore and offers the promise of tailored treatment plans. This approach leverages a deeper understanding of the disease's various

manifestations, which can lead to more tailored and effective treatments. Furthermore, research on the autonomic nervous system response to ADHD drugs has shown a pronounced effect of stimulants on physiological indicators such as heart rate and arousal levels. These insights pave the way for expanded research efforts, particularly at the time of ADHD therapeutic strategies and the broader spectrum of physiological responses [9,10].

Conclusion

The comprehensive synthesis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) research highlights the critical role of appropriate treatment in managing symptoms and improving long-term outcomes. Untreated ADHD affects self-esteem and social functioning negatively. However, treatment, particularly pharmacotherapy, has been associated with positive outcomes in academic achievement, employment opportunities, and reduced substance use, as highlighted by Faraone et al. (2013). Pharmacotherapy, including medications such as methylphenidate, amphetamine, atomoxetine, and bupropion, has shown efficacy in the treatment of ADHD. While stimulants such as methylphenidate and amphetamines are more effective, they can cause side effects in some individuals. Non-stimulants, although less potent, offer alternatives for those experiencing side effects. Clonidine and guanfacine, although less effective, play a role in treatment strategies. The study highlights the need for ongoing research to compare the efficacy and safety of these medications over the long term. An important aspect of ADHD treatment is its individualized approach, taking into account patient-specific factors and treatment goals. The study underlines that stimulants are generally more effective than non-stimulants, but they can also have more side effects. The choice of medication should therefore be adapted to the individual's needs. The results suggest that pharmacotherapy for ADHD leads to improved academic performance, higher likelihood of employment, and reduced risk for substance use, delinquency, and an overall better quality of life. Such results demonstrate that pharmacotherapy is a critical component of comprehensive ADHD treatment. For children with tics, drugs such as methylphenidate, clonidine, guanfacine, desipramine, and atomoxetine have been shown to reduce ADHD symptoms, although the quality of evidence is low to very low.

There remains concern that tics are sometimes exacerbated by stimulants, suggesting that alpha agonists or atomoxetine may be suitable alternatives. Despite evidence supporting desipramine's efficacy in improving tics and ADHD, safety concerns limit its use. The study contributes significantly to the understanding of the long-term effects of ADHD medication. It finds that stimulant treatment does not influence the long-term development of ADHD symptoms, social-emotional functioning, motor control, timing, or verbal working memory. Adolescence appears to produce clinical improvement, regardless of stimulant treatment during this period. The research provides important guidance for doctors and decision makers in the selection of ADHD drugs. This suggests that the choice of medication should be age-specific and weigh both efficacy and tolerability. Methylphenidate is preferred for children and adolescents, while amphetamines may be more suitable for adults. This requires further research into the long-term effects of these drugs. In addition, the study highlights the potential role of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) in the therapeutic effects of stimulant medications for ADHD. It suggests that clinicians should monitor ANS function in patients using stimulant drugs, and future research should examine the effects of nonstimulant drugs on ANS function. In summary, this synthesis of research findings underscores the importance of personalized, evidence-based approaches to the treatment of ADHD. The effectiveness and safety of pharmacotherapy varies between different age groups, requiring tailored treatment plans. The role of the ANS in ADHD and its treatment presents an exciting avenue for future research and promises further advances in understanding and managing ADHD.

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