

Executive Summary

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a chronic condition characterised by the symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Historically regarded as a disorder of childhood only, it is now recognised that ADHD persists into adulthood in a significant proportion of children with the disorder.
- ADHD manifests somewhat differently in adults than it does in children, with physical hyperactivity much less evident in adults than in children. Adults with ADHD experience a range of impairments as a result of their disorder, including poor social relations, academic failure, and poor employment history.
- Stimulant medication is the most common form of treatment for adult ADHD. The stimulant drugs used in Australia to treat adult ADHD are dexamphetamine and methylphenidate.
- In NSW, the prescribing of stimulant medication for the treatment of ADHD in adults is mainly restricted to psychiatrists, and is monitored by the Pharmaceutical Services Branch of the NSW Department of Health.
- This study presents recent trends in the prescribing of stimulant medication for the treatment of ADHD in adults in NSW.
- Over the period 1990 to 2002, there was an increase in the number of adults with ADHD who were commenced on stimulant medication for the first time. Most of this increase occurred after 1993. In 2002, the number of adults who commenced treatment for the first time was 12.5 times greater than the number who commenced in 1993.
- On average, the age of adults with ADHD first commenced on stimulant medication increased over the period 1990 to 2002. In 1990, the average age was about 23 years, while in 2002 it was almost 34 years.
- There was also an increase in the rate of adults (that is, number per 10,000 people aged 18 years or over) treated with stimulant medication over this period. It went from less than one per 10,000 in June 1993 to seven per 10,000 in June 2003. The increase in the rate for females was greater than the increase in the rate for males.
- Since 2001, there has been little increase in the rate of adults with ADHD on stimulant medication.
- The increase in prescribing of stimulant medication for adults with ADHD is likely to be due to a number of factors, including an increase in public and clinician awareness and acceptance of ADHD as a disorder, an increase in the availability of specialised services for assessing and treating ADHD, and an increase in the prescribing of stimulants for children with ADHD. Also, a broadening of the diagnostic criteria for ADHD and a greater emphasis on the inattentive aspects of ADHD over time may have contributed to the upward trend in stimulant treatment, particularly for women with ADHD among whom inattentive features tend to predominate.
- As at June 2003, there were about 3,500 adults on stimulant medication for the treatment of ADHD, representing a rate of seven per 10,000 people (or about 0.1 per cent) aged 18 years or over.
- On average, for every adult female with ADHD on stimulant medication as at June 2003 there were 1.7 adult males with ADHD on stimulants.

- A higher proportion of adults with ADHD are treated with dexamphetamine than methylphenidate. This apparent preference among adults for dexamphetamine over methylphenidate is likely to be related to economic reasons but may also be related to drug effectiveness or tolerance, or prescriber differences.
- Differences in rates of stimulant treatment occur according to area health service. As at June 2003, the Wentworth Area Health Service had the highest rate (14.4 per 10,000 people aged 18 years or over) followed by the Northern Sydney Area Health Service (13.8 per 10,000 people aged 18 years or over). The lowest rate was observed in the Far West Area Health Service (0.8 per 10,000 people aged 18 years or over). More than half of the area health services in NSW had a rate ranging between five and 10 per 10,000 population aged 18 years or over. Regional differences in prescribing may be due to different rates of disorder persistence from childhood to adulthood, differences in treatment retention rates, availability of assessment and treatment services, socioeconomic factors, and variations in prescriber practices.
- About one-third of the adults with ADHD on stimulant treatment as at June 2003 were initially treated with stimulants as children. Thus, for the majority, the first time they were treated with stimulants was as an adult. This is consistent with the observation that many adults who have ADHD are not diagnosed until adulthood.
- The chronic nature of ADHD means that sufferers will typically require ongoing treatment. Long-term use of stimulants is fairly common. About one-fifth of adults on medication as at June 2003 had been on stimulants for more than five years.
- Early attrition from treatment is quite common. Follow-up of adults who commenced stimulant treatment in 1998 indicated that about one-quarter discontinued treatment after the initial episode of treatment. This is consistent with reports that stimulant medication is not effective for at least 25 per cent of adults.
- Despite recent increases in the prescribing of stimulant medication, treatment rates for adults with ADHD in NSW remain relatively low when compared with the number of adults likely to have the disorder. Comprehensive and judicious assessment procedures are essential for ensuring that patients with ADHD are properly identified and receive the most appropriate treatment, whether this be medication, psychosocial intervention, or a combination of both. Because of its demonstrated effectiveness in reducing ADHD symptoms, treatment will include the use of stimulant medication for many adults with ADHD.