

ADHD AND ACCIDENTS: SIDE EFFECTS OF NOT TREATING ADHD

JULIE T. STECK, PHD, HSPP
CHILDREN'S RESOURCE GROUP

...

With summer upon us, many parents are questioning the need to have their child with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder take their stimulant medication when they are not in school. Over the past decade there has been increasing evidence that suggests that children do better with ADHD when taking their medicine in non-academic settings, as well as academic settings. Numerous studies have indicated that there are fewer behavioral problems at home, there are fewer disagreements with friends and siblings, and the child has less irritability when children are on the appropriate medication.

The benefits of medication have been well-documented and reported. Debate continues, however, about the side effects and risks of using stimulant medications. Dr. Russell Barkley, a well-respected research psychologist in the area of ADHD, recently published an article in the [ADHD Report](#) in which he summarized studies which have reported on the increase in accident proneness among children with ADHD. These findings bring to light some of the side effects of *not treating* ADHD with medication.

Parental reports indicate that children with ADHD are more likely to have a variety of accidental injuries. Up to 57% of hyperactive ADHD children are reported to be accident prone by their parents, while only 11% of children from the general population are described in the same way. However, children who are hyperactive and impulsive do not have less knowledge about safety. Rather, they forget to utilize what they know to prevent accidents. Unfortunately, this means that knowledge about safety may not be enough to help reduce the accident risks of hyperactive children.

Children with ADHD have approximately a three-fold increased likelihood of accidental poisoning. Studies have shown that 15.6% of hyperactive children have had at least four serious accidental injuries, including broken bones, lacerations, head injuries, severe bruises, and lost teeth. Only 4.8% of children in the general population sustain such injuries. At the same time, 68.4% of children with ADHD (and only 39.5% of the general population) have experienced physical trauma sufficient to warrant sutures, hospitalization, or extensive/painful procedures. Bone fractures are also more common in ADHD children.

As children with ADHD grow up and become teenagers with ADHD, these accidental injuries become much more frightening. Hyperactive teenagers have a significantly greater number of vehicular crashes, as well as greater frequency of citations for speeding, than the general population. 40% of teens with ADHD have experienced two or more driving accidents, while the rate in the general population is 5.6%. Additionally, four times more teens with ADHD (in comparison with controls) were deemed to have been at fault in their crashes. The dollar damage from the group of ADHD young adults was estimated to be twice as high as the control group. In the adult population, 4 % of

the general population has had their licenses suspended while 24% of ADHD adults have had their licenses suspended. Interestingly, the hyperactive adult subjects who had been on stimulant medications as adolescents had significantly fewer car accidents than those untreated with stimulants.

The correlation between ADHD and accident proneness is clearly evident. Children and adolescents with co-existing disorders are likely at higher risk of accidents than those with only ADHD. Studies have indicated that risk of accidents improves when children are on their stimulant medications. This is likely due to improvement in impulse control, less risk-taking, better ability to become involved in and stay with structured, goal directed activities, and improved attention and alertness. Summertime is a time of increased injury in general. Children and adolescents have more free time, they are participating in more active sports, and they often have less adult supervision. For those children and adolescents with ADHD, summertime may be as important a time for use of medication as during the school year. For children and adolescents who have not been diagnosed with ADHD but who have had frequent accidents, summer may be the appropriate time to further investigate the possibility of ADHD and/or other co-existing conditions. The recognition, diagnosis, and treatment of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is therefore imperative in helping keep our children, teens, and adults safer from accidental injury.

DATA TAKEN FROM: BARKLEY, RUSSELL A., PH.D. "ADHD AND ACCIDENT PRONENESS." THE ADHD REPORT. MAY 2002. PAGES 2-5.