

Stimulant Misuse

Understanding the risks, the signs and where to get help

Stimulants increase activity in the central nervous system. The term includes prescribed stimulants used for conditions such as ADHD and narcolepsy, as well as non-prescribed substances including amphetamines and methamphetamine. Misuse can involve taking a prescribed stimulant differently from instructions, using someone else's medication, taking stimulants to stay awake or perform, or using them for intoxication. Problems can develop around energy, confidence, productivity, socialising, weight control or the wish to keep going when the body needs rest.

The acceleration - overstimulation - crash cycle

Acceleration A stimulant may initially increase alertness, energy, confidence, talkativeness or perceived focus.	Overstimulation As dose, frequency or sleep loss increases, the same activation can become agitation, anxiety, racing thoughts or suspiciousness.
Crash When the effects wear off, exhaustion, low mood, irritability, increased appetite, sleep disruption and cravings can follow.	Repetition Using again to restore energy or escape the crash can reinforce a cycle that becomes increasingly difficult to interrupt.

Signs the pattern may be becoming harmful

Possible signs include taking more or more often than intended; needing increasing amounts; strong cravings; repeated attempts to cut down; staying awake for long periods; reduced appetite or weight changes; anxiety, irritability or panic; heart racing; secrecy; financial or relationship difficulties; using despite physical or mental-health consequences; and feeling unable to work, study, socialise or function without a stimulant. Prescribed medication can also become problematic, but physical dependence or tolerance alone does not automatically mean addiction.

Physical and psychological risks

Stimulants can increase heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature. Higher doses, repeated dosing and prolonged wakefulness can increase the risk of dehydration, overheating, abnormal heart rhythms, chest pain, seizures and stroke. Psychological effects can include severe anxiety, panic, agitation, confusion, suspiciousness, paranoia or hallucinations. Sleep deprivation can intensify these effects. Risks vary substantially according to the drug, dose, route, individual health and other substances used.

When it is an emergency

Call 999 for severe chest pain, collapse, seizure, signs of stroke, severe breathing difficulty, extreme overheating, loss of consciousness, or severe agitation/confusion where someone is in immediate danger. If you know what may have been taken, tell emergency services. Do not assume that a serious reaction will simply pass because the person is young or has used stimulants before.

Prescribed stimulants deserve a careful distinction

If a prescribed stimulant is no longer working as expected, side effects are difficult, or you are taking it differently from the prescription, speak with the prescriber rather than changing the dose yourself. ADHD treatment taken as prescribed is not the same as illicit stimulant misuse. A good review should consider effectiveness, side effects, sleep, appetite, cardiovascular symptoms, mental health and whether the medication is being used in ways that were not intended.

A first step towards change

Map what happens before use. Is the trigger exhaustion, deadlines, social confidence, low mood, boredom, appetite concerns, untreated symptoms or fear of the crash? Then identify what the stimulant is doing for you in that moment. Recovery support is stronger when it addresses the need underneath the behaviour as well as the stimulant itself.

Stimulant Misuse - Support and Recovery

Practical next steps, UK support and rebuilding after the crash

Where to get help in the UK

GP / prescriber	For prescribed stimulants, request a medication review. For non-prescribed use, a GP can assess physical and mental-health concerns and help you access specialist support.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services support stimulant problems as well as other substance use. Many accept self-referrals and offer assessment, one-to-one support, groups and wider practical help.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about local services.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings using practical tools for motivation, managing urges, problem-solving and maintaining change.
Narcotics Anonymous UK	Peer-led recovery fellowship with in-person and online meetings. Helpline: 0300 999 1212 .
Urgent help	For a serious medical or safety emergency call 999 . NHS 111 can provide urgent medical advice where available when the situation is not a 999 emergency.

The 'speed and crash' reflection

Draw two columns. Under **What I gain in the short term**, write the effects you are actually seeking: energy, concentration, confidence, sociability, appetite suppression, excitement or escape. Under **What it costs afterwards**, record sleep, mood, anxiety, physical symptoms, money, relationships, work or study. Then add a third question: **What would need to change so I do not have to borrow energy from tomorrow?** This can identify where practical or therapeutic support is needed.

Rebuilding the basics

Stimulant patterns can disrupt sleep, eating, hydration, routine and emotional regulation. Recovery may therefore involve deliberately rebuilding ordinary rhythms as well as managing cravings. Support can include structured psychological work, peer recovery, treatment for co-existing mental-health difficulties and appropriate review of prescribed medication. If exhaustion or low mood after stopping feels severe or persistent, seek professional advice rather than assuming you must simply push through it.

Supporting somebody else

Choose a calm time and describe what you have noticed rather than arguing about labels. Encourage medical help for chest symptoms, severe anxiety, paranoia or prolonged sleep deprivation. Avoid lending money or covering consequences that place you at risk. If the person becomes severely confused, threatening, physically unwell or unable to keep themselves or others safe, seek urgent help. Supporting recovery does not mean becoming responsible for it.

One book to explore

Overcoming Your Alcohol or Drug Problem: Effective Recovery Strategies - Dennis C. Daley and G. Alan Marlatt. This practical book is not limited to stimulants, but its focus on triggers, cravings, coping responses and relapse prevention fits the stimulant cycle well. I particularly like the way it turns broad intentions such as 'I need to stop' into patterns that can be observed and changed. It is best used as a companion to appropriate professional or peer support rather than as a substitute for assessment when physical or psychological risks are significant.

A message from Maggie

When stimulants become tied to getting things done, keeping up, feeling confident or simply having enough energy to face the day, slowing down can feel frightening rather than comforting. Recovery may involve understanding why ordinary limits became so difficult to tolerate and what support was missing underneath the pressure to keep going. You do not have to wait for a dramatic crisis. An honest medication review, a drug-service appointment, a conversation with someone you trust or one change to a high-risk routine can be the beginning.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical assessment. Stimulant-related chest pain, severe neurological symptoms, seizures, collapse or dangerous agitation require urgent medical attention. Medication changes should be discussed with the appropriate prescriber. Risks vary by substance, dose, route, sleep deprivation, health conditions and other substances used. Service details can change and should be checked before publication.