

Smart Drug Harm Reduction



SUSU Advice
Centre



SMART DRUG HARM REDUCTION

Smart drugs, also known as nootropics, are a group of substances that claim to boost your brainpower, focus, and memory. They've become increasingly popular in recent years as people seek ways to improve their cognitive performance.

Whether it's an essay you want to do well in, exams you need to revise for, or a looming project deadline, the idea of popping a pill for that much-needed brain boost can seem appealing.

Hundreds of drugs – both manufactured pharmaceuticals and natural organic substances – claim to boost your brain power and increase intelligence.

This page contains information about the two most commonly used smart drugs in the UK: the manufactured pharmaceuticals modafinil and Ritalin. It will explain what they are, the risks of using them and how to reduce those risks.

RITALIN & MODAFINIL

Ritalin

Is a brand-name prescription medication with the active ingredient methylphenidate, generally used for treating ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and sometimes narcolepsy (falling asleep without warning).



Modafinil

A prescription-only stimulant, is sold under the names Provigil, Modalert, Alertec and Modavigil. Modafinil is used to treat sleep disorders like narcolepsy.

HOW THEY WORK AND HOW THEY MAKE YOU FEEL

Both drugs are stimulants, which affect the level of certain chemicals in your brain (neurotransmitters). The effects are like stimulants: they will make you feel more awake, alert, and energised.

THE LAW

Ritalin (methylphenidate) is a controlled 'Class B' substance and is illegal to possess or supply without a prescription. Modafinil is legal to possess but is illegal to supply without a prescription.

THE RISKS AND SIDE EFFECTS

- **Raised blood pressure and increased heart rate**
- **Insomnia**
- **Headaches**
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Dizziness**
- **Skin rash**
- **In extreme cases, large doses can cause a psychotic episode**
- **Irregular sleep patterns**

Stimulants can cause insomnia and irregular sleep patterns, increase stress, weaken the immune system, and raise the risk of cardiovascular disease and depression.



- **Focus Shift**

Some people who use smart drugs find their focus has shifted from the task they set out to do to something else that's distracted them.

- **Pregnancy and contraception**

If you use modafinil during pregnancy, it may cause birth defects. It can also reduce the effectiveness of some hormonal contraceptives, including oral contraceptives. Ritalin may increase the risk of having a miscarriage. Some studies have suggested an increased chance for fetal heart defects when Ritalin is used during pregnancy. If you're breast-feeding, avoid using any drug not prescribed by a health professional.

- **Addiction and withdrawal**

Some people experience withdrawal symptoms such as poor concentration, sleepiness, low energy, depression, anxiety and shortness of breath. They're usually infrequent and, in most cases, relatively mild. Addiction to modafinil is unlikely, but it may be possible as it affects neurotransmitters like dopamine.

- **Buying medicines online**

Buying prescription-only medicines from unauthorised sources can increase the risk of getting poor quality or fake medication, or even not what you thought you were buying, putting yourself at serious risk of harm.

- **Driving**

Both can cause blurred vision and might affect your reactions and ability to drive. It's an offence to drive while your reactions are impaired.



HARM REDUCTION TIPS

Modafinil and Ritalin are intended for people who need medication for specific conditions. You increase the risks if you take drugs, you don't medically need. Do your best to avoid using study drugs. But, if you're still considering taking them, here are some tips on reducing the potential for harm:

- **Know the risks**

Research the drugs you want to take. Don't take what your friends or websites say at face value.

- **Know when to stop**

If you get any adverse side effects, such as anxiety, insomnia, or headaches, stop taking them.

- **Low and slow**

Start with a low dose and see how you react. You can always increase the amount later, if needed.

- **Avoid mixing with drugs or alcohol**

Mixing smart drugs with other drugs or alcohol, makes their effects unpredictable. Drugs and alcohol can cancel each other out. You could take more to get the same effects - leading to dangerous levels of both. Even at low doses, some combinations can increase how long the effects last, make sleep more difficult and increase the risk of high blood pressure, racing heartbeat, panic attacks and serotonin toxicity.

- **Take a break**

Don't take them every day. They can have a cumulative effect. Even if you don't have side effects, taking breaks from them can help to reduce the risk of dependency.



- **Don't mix with antidepressants**

Avoid taking MAO inhibitors (anti-depressants). Be cautious: both substances affect chemicals in the brain and, when combined, can cause dangerous interactions.

DO SMART DRUGS WORK?

For people who have no medical need for Ritalin or modafinil, they are risky, and unlikely to make any difference to their cognitive performance. If there is any benefit, research suggests it's quite modest and rather than making you smarter, they make you feel more awake and alert, so you get more done. Most people would be better off focusing on getting enough sleep, following a healthy diet, and managing deadline stress.

BEFORE YOU REACH FOR THE PILLS, CONSIDER THESE STUDY TECHNIQUES:

- **Find a good place to study**

Make sure the space is free from distractions and that you've got everything you need, such as your textbooks, notes, and a computer.

- **Set realistic goals**

Don't try to cram everything into one study session. Break what you're doing down into smaller, more manageable chunks.

- **Use active learning techniques**

Don't try to cram everything into one study session. Break what you're doing down into smaller, more manageable chunks.

- **Take breaks**

Studying for long periods can be counterproductive. Get up and move around every 20-30 minutes to avoid burnout.



- **Reward yourself**

When you reach a study goal, give yourself a small reward to help with motivation.

- **Manage your stress**

Stress can make it difficult to focus and learn. Find healthy ways to manage stress, such as exercise, yoga, or meditation. Exercise has been linked to enhanced memory, improved focus, and increased cognitive flexibility. Meditation can help improve attention and focus.

WHAT TO DO IN AN EMERGENCY

If you, or someone you know, are experiencing any of the following symptoms, call 999 immediately:

- **Chest pains**
- **Extreme confusion or severe agitation**
- **Uncontrollable shivering or shaking**
- **Overheating and an inability to control body temperature**
- **Stomach pains and/or continuous vomiting**

Stay with the person in an emergency and reassure them until help arrives. Be honest about what they've taken, how much, and when.

ADDITIONAL HELP AND SUPPORT

Talk to Frank

National drugs awareness site for young people. Call **0800 77 66 00** (calls are free and confidential)



Mind *mind.org.uk*

Student mental health information.

Release | Drugs, The Law *release.org.uk*

Free non-judgmental, specialist advice and information on issues related to drug use and to drug laws.

