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Heart Risks With Stimulant Use? Maybe. Worry? For Some.

By [BENEDICT CAREY](#)

Psychiatrists say they have been getting panicked phone calls from patients worried by a government advisory panel's recommendation this month that drugs for attention-deficit disorder carry a prominent warning about heart risks.

The calls are coming not just from parents of children who take the drugs but from adult users, who the panel warned might be at the highest risk for heart problems.

"Every single adult patient I saw today, the first thing out of their mouth was, 'Am I going to drop dead on this?' Every single one of them," said Dr. Timothy Wilens, a psychiatrist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston.

Dr. James McGough, a professor of clinical psychiatry at the University of California, Los Angeles, said he had received several calls from parents "who were very upset and nervous" about potential risks.

The panel, convened to consider ways the drugs' effects on the heart could be investigated, made its recommendation on Feb. 9 based on a Food and Drug Administration analysis of more than 300 people who died while they were taking stimulant medications. The agency concluded that in 25 of the cases — 19 children and 6 adults — the stimulant appeared to be strongly related to the deaths, many apparently from heart problems.

The Food and Drug Administration will soon decide whether to accept the advisory panel's advice and require a strong warning on the drugs' labels.

Doctors who treat adults and children with stimulants like Ritalin and Adderall say the risk is remote, given that an estimated 2.5 million children and 1.5 million adults are taking the medications, and a handful of them will die suddenly each year, whether taking drugs or not.

But psychiatrists and cardiologists say that people with high [blood pressure](#), heart murmurs or other cardiovascular problems should talk to their doctors to determine whether they need to be more closely monitored or should taper off the drugs altogether.

"Ideally, doctors should be screening patients for these things up front, before prescribing the drugs," said Dr. James Waxmonsky, a psychiatrist at the University at Buffalo, part of the State University of New York.

Some panel members expressed concerns about children with structural heart abnormalities who might be given stimulants. Perhaps the most common abnormality is hypertrophic obstructive cardiomyopathy, a thickening of the muscle that can cause a blockage — and death — when under stress.

Such problems are often not diagnosed before drug treatment begins, but a good pediatrician who is aware a child is being considered for stimulant treatment will often pick up a soft heart murmur that might reflect an abnormality, said Dr. Steven Nissen, chief of cardiology at the Cleveland Clinic and a panel member. "This seemingly small step could save a life," he said.

Norine Eaton, 50, of Williamsville, N.Y., who has been on stimulants for attention problems for six years and who has two teenage sons on the medications, said she read about the panel's warning in a newspaper article.

"If I had any family history of [heart disease](#), I would absolutely have stood up and called my doctor," she said in a telephone interview, "but I have not noticed any heart problems in myself or my sons."

The biggest worry for adults is high blood pressure. Stimulants usually prompt slight increases in heart rate and raise blood pressure, and even these changes can increase the risk of heart problems in someone who is vulnerable, Dr. Nissen said.

Adults with hypertension who are considering the drugs should have their blood pressure stabilized first, doctors say.

"A smoker with high [cholesterol](#) and a family history of heart disease: that's a person I would be very concerned about taking stimulants," Dr. Nissen said.

Lew Mills, 49, a therapist in San Francisco who takes a stimulant for attention-deficit disorder, said he first worried about the drugs' effect about a year and a half ago, when he was moving after a divorce and felt overwhelmed by stress. He said he went to a doctor and found that his blood pressure was elevated. "I was concerned that the medicine was adding to the blood pressure problem," he said.

But Dr. Mills said that he stayed on the stimulants and resumed exercising, and that once the divorce was complete, his blood pressure soon returned to normal.

Dr. Wilens of Massachusetts General has just completed a study of 13 men and women, ages 20 to 55, being treated for high blood pressure who were also taking Adderall, a strong stimulant.

The patients spent six weeks on Adderall and two weeks off, while doctors monitored their blood pressure.

Two of them had mild increases in blood pressure, one while taking the stimulant and the other while not.

"It's a small study, but we found the same rate of symptoms" whether people were on the stimulants or not, said Dr. Wilens, who consults widely with drug makers.

Answers to just a few questions can tell a doctor a lot about a person's risk. Are there any congenital or structural heart defects? Are there unexplained bouts of dizziness or heart palpitations? Is there any family history of heart disease, in particular sudden deaths in close relatives who died young?

Doctors considering stimulant treatment should be asking all these questions. And if the answers are not forthcoming — many parents have no idea if a child has an underlying heart abnormality, for example — at least families will be aware of possible risks and can investigate further.

"Over all, I think some type of warning is a good idea, and it does lead to more in-depth discussions between doctors and families," Dr. Waxmonsky said in an e-mail message. "However, it would be helpful to know what the exact risk is so that we could provide patients with some meaningful numbers instead of just theoretical concerns."

William Pelham, a psychologist at the University at Buffalo who studies psychosocial treatments for attention-deficit disorder, said that a warning might also prompt parents to consider addressing the problem without drugs. "As it is, most parents don't even hear about the alternatives to medication," he said.

In a recent trial that involved 154 children, most of them on stimulants, Dr. Pelham found that an intensive summer-long course of behavior modification allowed most parents to reduce the level of drugs their children

were taking or wean them off the medication altogether.

Still, many patients say they will take their chances with stimulants even if they have heart problems in their families.

Joseph Neal, 29, a student and Web designer in Nashville, said he had totaled two cars as a result of attention-deficit problems. "Quite simply, it is not safe for me to operate a motor vehicle while unmedicated," he wrote in an e-mail message.

He said he found the concerns over rare side effects "quite absurd."

"I need these medications to be a fully functional human being," Mr. Neal said. "If there was a one-in-four chance that I'd grow a second head, I'd take it. Besides, the second head might work better."