

# Revving up on Ritalin

*Ritalin feels like speed to the person taking it but looks like a sedative to observers.*

By Walter Kirn

(Mr. Kirn is the literary editor of GQ magazine.)

Six year ago, a Montana psychiatrist diagnosed me with ADHD. And not only did my problem have a name; it had a simple treatment. Ritalin.

When I swallowed my first white pill, I was racked with suspense. Soon I'd become either a cool, clear thinker or a placid, malleable zombie.

But I became neither. Trickling electrically up my spine and neck, then spreading across my scalp and down my forehead came a surge of artificial illumination so sharp and radiant it made me grin.

The bones in my face felt shiny, light, metallic, and my posture — usually lousy — corrected itself in an instant. My cluttered desk metamorphosed into a new sports car, throbbing deep with hidden rpm, ready to peel rubber at my command.

What a day. In no time, I was typing like a madman, spraying sentences like a broken hose. My customary method of composition — slow, deliberate, reflective, and filled with self-critical pauses and revisions — gave way to a swooping, driven, verbal momentum that filled the screen as quickly as I could read.

At one point, I forced myself to reread my piece, afraid that I'd been spewing druggy nonsense. Not at all. It was lovely, every line, its logic and emotion synchronized, its arguments sound.

Except for one wrong word. Well, two wrong words. I pondered a list of synonyms. None seemed right. I frowned. My mood was sinking.

I checked the clock and saw that I'd been writing for six high-octane, uninterrupted hours. Time for another dose of Ritalin. I'd been warned that the drug was short-acting, its half-life brief, and that keeping a steady blood level was crucial.



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Unscrewing the pill bottle's childproof cap, I nearly cracked the plastic in desperation. For the hour between taking my tablet and feeling it hit, I felt like a driver broken down in the desert, watching the steam rise from his radiator.

Relief arrived in a second tingling rush, and soon I was back at my desk, productive again, though not feeling quite so inspired as earlier.

About this time, my girlfriend entered my office. Apparently, she'd been peeking in all day, but I'd been too preoccupied to notice her. "Looks like it's going smoothly," she said.

*Smoothly?* Not the word I'd have chosen.

I sat there, thinking. I'd been whirled in a white tornado that afternoon, lofted into the skies and smashed back down, but from the outside I'd been working 'smoothly.' The inner drama hadn't shown, it seemed. How curious.

A funny drug, this Ritalin. It feels like speed to the person taking it but looks like a sedative to observers. It's no wonder, I thought, that parents and teachers love the stuff.

I felt guilty each time I renewed a prescription because the drug was so damned powerful — as euphoria-inducing as any illegal substance I'd ever tried. In fact, its effects were better. Cleaner. Tighter.

Plus, compared to street drugs it was cheap. For the amount cokeheads pay for one night's high, I could soar for a month without fear of police.

Make no mistake.

Ritalin is an upper. It may look like a downer on rambunctious kids, but it's an upper. The teachers are on the outside, looking in, monitoring behaviour, not emotion. All they see are rows of little heads sitting obediently at little desks.

The kids are the ones on the inside. It's different there — stranger, hotter, faster. I know: I've been there, cranking out the pages, utterly focused, on target and in the groove.

Forget how the little white pills make Johnny feel — sitting still and silent at his desk while his brain bores through textbooks like a power drill — they make the adults looking after him feel great!

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