

What Is Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder?



Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood disorders, and often lasts into adulthood. It is characterized by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity that interferes with day-to-day functioning or development.

What Are The Symptoms?

Inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity are the characteristic behaviors in people with ADHD. Some individuals with ADHD only have problems with one of the behaviors, while others have both inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity. It is normal to have some inattention, unfocused motor activity, and impulsivity. However, for those with ADHD, these behaviors are more severe, occur more often, and interfere with, or reduce the quality of how they function socially, at school, or in a job.

Inattention

Examples of inattention may include: overlooking details and making careless mistakes; an inability to sustain attention in tasks or play, such as lectures, conversations, or lengthy reading; daydreaming or not listening when spoken to directly; failing to follow through on instructions, schoolwork, chores, or workplace tasks; difficulty organizing and prioritizing tasks and activities; avoiding tasks that require sustained focus; losing things necessary for tasks or activities such as school supplies, books, tools, keys, wallets, paperwork, eyeglasses, and phones; being easily distracted by unrelated thoughts or stimuli; forgetting activities such as chores, errands, returning phone calls or emails, or appointments; and failing to meet deadlines.

Hyperactivity/Impulsivity

Symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity include: an inability to sit still or restlessness; leaving one's seat in situations when staying seated is expected, such as in the classroom or office; running around or climbing in situations where it is inappropriate; being unable to play or engage in hobbies quietly; talking nonstop; blurting out answers before a question has been completed; finishing other people's sentences or speaking out of turn; difficulty in taking turns; interrupting or intruding on others in conversations, games or activities; being unable to resist temptation; taking unnecessary risks; and being unable to get along with others.

- **ADHD is a common, treatable disorder that is often diagnosed in elementary school-aged children, but may also be diagnosed in adolescents or adults.**
- **Inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity are the key symptoms of ADHD. These can negatively affect how people function in school, at work, and in social situations.**
- **Getting treatment from a qualified health care provider, as well as support from family and teachers, can help an individual manage symptoms and reach their full potential.**

How Is ADHD Diagnosed?

Diagnosis of ADHD requires a comprehensive evaluation by a healthcare provider, social worker, or a psychologist with expertise in ADHD. Often, a thorough medical exam is necessary to rule out other problems with symptoms similar to ADHD. For a person to receive a diagnosis of ADHD, the symptoms of inattention and/or hyperactivity/impulsivity must be chronic or long-lasting, impair the individual's functioning, and cause them to fall behind typical development for their age. Most children with ADHD receive a diagnosis during the elementary school years. For a teen or adult to receive the diagnosis, their symptoms need to have been present before age 12. ADHD symptoms can appear as early as between the ages of 3 and 6 and can continue through the teen years and into adulthood. Symptoms can be mistaken for emotional or disciplinary problems or missed entirely in quiet, well-behaved children, leading to a delay in diagnosis. Adults with undiagnosed ADHD may have a history of poor academic performance, problems at work, or difficult or failed relationships.



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What Causes ADHD?

The condition tends to run in families, but experts believe there are many complex factors that play a role. Studies suggest that some aspects of brain development can be delayed by 2 or 3 years in children with ADHD, especially in the parts of the brain involved in thinking, planning, and paying attention. For many children, the brain later develops normally, and they catch up, even though some symptoms may continue throughout their lives.

Like many illnesses, several factors can contribute to ADHD, such as: genes; alcohol, tobacco, or other drug use in pregnancy; exposure to environmental toxins in pregnancy; exposure to environmental toxins – such as high levels of lead – at a young age; low birth weight; and brain injuries.

ADHD is more common in males than females, and females with ADHD are more likely to have problems primarily with inattention. Other conditions, such as learning disabilities, anxiety disorder, conduct disorder, depression, and substance misuse are common in people with ADHD.

Treatments And Therapies

While there is no cure for ADHD, treatments can help reduce symptoms and improve functioning. Treatments include medication, psychotherapy, education or training, or a combination of treatments.

How Can Counseling Help?

Psychosocial interventions such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT), Parent Management Training (PMT), marriage and family therapy, and specific behavioral classroom management interventions can help children and adults focus and learn skills so they eventually won't need reminders to complete routine tasks.

How Do Medications Work?

For many people, ADHD medications reduce hyperactivity and impulsivity and improve their ability to focus, work, and learn. Medication may also improve physical coordination. Sometimes several different medications or dosages must be tried before finding the right one that works for an individual. Anyone taking medications must be monitored carefully by their prescribing healthcare provider.

Stimulants are the most common type of medications used for treating ADHD. A stimulant works by increasing the brain chemicals dopamine and norepinephrine, which play essential roles in thinking and attention. As with any medication, individuals may experience side effects, which should be discussed with the prescribing healthcare provider.

A few other ADHD medications are **non-stimulants**. These medications take longer to start working than stimulants, but can also improve focus, attention, and impulsivity in a person with ADHD. Healthcare providers may prescribe a stimulant when an individual has bothersome side effects from stimulants, when a stimulant was not effective, or in combination with a stimulant to increase effectiveness.

Children and adults with ADHD need treatment as well as guidance and understanding from their parents, families, and teachers to reach their full potential and succeed.

Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental
Health and Addiction Services
www.ct.gov/DMHAS
United Way 2-1-1
www.211ct.org or call 2.1.1

National Resources

National Institute of Mental
Health (NIMH)
www.nimh.nih.gov
Center for Parent Information
and Resources
[www.parentcenterhub.org/find-
your-center/](http://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/)
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