

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Adults

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that begins in early childhood and may continue into adulthood. Being restless and very easily distracted are the most common features of the adult disorder. It is often called by an older name, attention deficit disorder (ADD).

ADHD is the most common mental health problem in children. Between 3% and 7% of all school-age children have ADHD. Some children with ADHD will carry symptoms into their adult years.

How does it occur?

The cause of this disorder is unknown. Both genetics and factors in the environment may play a role. Research suggests that it may have a biological cause. People with ADHD have several small differences in their brain structure. These differences are in the front part of the brain (an area involved in self-control) and in some parts in the center of the brain.

Much research has looked at whether ADHD is caused by sugar or things added to foods such as preservatives and coloring. The evidence has not connected these with ADHD. Allergies are not a common factor in causing ADHD either.

ADHD runs in families, especially through the males in the family line. Research continues in an effort to find out why it occurs in those without a family history.

What are the symptoms?

There are 3 main symptoms of ADHD:

- **inattention or distractibility** (trouble keeping attention on tasks). If you have ADHD, you are very easily distracted by things you see or hear around you. You will often begin a task but then become distracted before the task is completed. Distractibility is the main problem for many adults with ADHD.
- **poor impulse control**, or impulsivity (having a hard time with patience and waiting). With this symptom, you often react to things quickly and without thinking of the outcome. You may tend to interrupt others in conversations, begin tasks without enough planning, and be impatient. Impulse buying, impatience in driving, starting too many projects, and being very quick to anger are common. You may have social problems caused by being aggressive, loud, or impatient in groups and conversations.
- **hyperactivity** (excessive movement). If you are hyperactive, you are always on the go and constantly restless. You seldom sit still, and even when sitting, usually fidget or play with things. You may dislike activities such as watching movies or playing a quiet game of cards. You also tend to become bored very quickly. You may have difficulty slowing down at night to get to sleep.

Symptoms may change from childhood to adulthood. The most common changes occur during adolescence and are a reduction in hyperactivity and better self control. Difficulties with attention change the least between childhood and the adult years.

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For many people, childhood ADHD leads to other difficulties during adolescence and adulthood. Children who are hyperactive and have poor impulse control are more likely to develop other mental health problems than those whose only symptom is being easily distracted. The most common problem seen with ADHD is depression. Other problems include:

- anxiety disorders
- substance abuse
- learning disorders
- manic-depression (bipolar disorder)
- personality disorders (such as borderline personality disorder or antisocial personality disorder)
- impulse control disorders (such as gambling addiction)
- explosive anger.

About half of children with ADHD also have serious behavioral problems such as defiance or aggression. Many adults who have ADHD continue to have behavior problems.

About one-third of children with ADHD have trouble learning to read or do math. Some adults with ADHD continue to have problems with reading, writing, or math.

How is it diagnosed?

There are no lab tests to diagnose ADHD.

Your health care provider will ask about your symptoms and observe your behavior for signs of ADHD. To be diagnosed with ADHD, your symptoms must clearly interfere in a major way with your daily life. You and others close to you may complete questionnaires or rating forms about ADHD symptoms. You may see a psychologist or other mental health professional for tests of attention and self-control. You may see a mental health professional to screen for mental health problems in addition to ADHD.

There are 3 types of ADHD:

- In the **combined** type, all of the main symptoms are present: distractibility, poor impulse control, and hyperactivity.
- In the **predominately inattentive** type, attention problems dominate. Often, there is very little hyperactivity or impulsivity. This form is especially common among girls and women.
- In the **predominately impulsive-hyperactive** type, poor self-control is the major problem.

How is it treated?

The treatment of ADHD may involve 3 types of treatment:

- **Learning coping skills:** You will learn to avoid highly stimulating situations that distract and over-excite you. Read and work in quiet places and take frequent breaks. You may want to use day planners or pocket computers to organize your life. You tend to need more structure and daily routine than most people.
- **Behavioral training:** Simple behavior programs that help develop a longer attention span and the ability to sit still are moderately effective. One form of behavioral training is brainwave, or EEG, biofeedback. In this treatment, a mental health professional trains the

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person to maintain the brainwaves associated with attention and calmness. This treatment usually takes 15 to 30 sessions.

- **Medicines:** The same medicines used for children in the same dosages are effective for adults. Since the 1920s, the medicines methylphenidate (Ritalin) and dextroamphetamine (Dexedrine) have been used. They are stimulants, and appear to stimulate the self-control areas of the brain. They do not slow you down, but rather increase self-regulation. About 70% of those with ADHD improve with these medicines. The most common side effects are loss of appetite and trouble getting to sleep. Only daytime dosages are used until effects on eating and sleeping are known. Sometimes, medicines are used only on work days.

Two medicines similar to Ritalin and Dexedrine are pemoline (Cylert) and dextroamphetamine/amphetamine (Adderall). Adderall has not yet been widely used in adults.

When these medicines are not effective, certain medicines for depression can also help with ADHD.

Treatments that have not been found effective include diets that limit sugar, food additives, or food colorings. While there has been much research in this area since the 1970s, little has been found that connects diet to hyperactivity, impulsive behavior, or poor attention. People who believe certain foods such as sugar will make them "hyper," do change behavior after eating that food.

Many health foods and supplements are touted as helping with ADHD. No food, herb, or dietary supplement has any research support to prove that it helps.

How long do the effects last?

Symptoms may change from childhood to adulthood. Learning to cope with symptoms is one of the main tasks for adults with ADHD.

There are many jobs at which people with ADHD can excel. These include:

- fast-paced sales positions
- delivery drivers
- management positions that encourage movement about the business
- professions that reward high energy and handling multiple tasks.

What can I do to help myself or my loved one?

There are many helpful strategies to minimize the effects of ADHD. These include the following:

- When you need to read or concentrate, arrange tasks to be done away from the sounds of television, radio, or others talking.
- When you need to concentrate, try having low-level background sound such as white noise or instrumental music.
- Plan for tasks that require concentration to be done in short blocks of time with breaks in between.
- Follow a very structured daily routine for basic home and work events.
- If you have trouble slowing down at bedtime, a planned quiet time before bedtime and even

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background music when falling asleep are often helpful.

- Carry along socially acceptable things (such as worry stones or cushion balls) that can be played with when you are restless.

Written by Gayle Zieman, PhD, and Nakeesh A. Dewan, MD, for McKesson Clinical Reference Systems.

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