

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Introduction

ADHD is a common childhood disorder that makes it hard for a child to focus and pay attention. Some kids with ADHD also may be hyperactive or impatient. ADHD can make it hard for a child to do well in school or behave at home.

Children and teens of all backgrounds can have ADHD. It is estimated that 3 to 5% of all children have ADHD. Adults can have ADHD too, and may be affected by it at work, in relationships, as well as with family. With proper treatment, people with ADHD can learn to manage their symptoms. Medication and behavior therapy limit the negative effects the symptoms of ADHD may have on their success in life.

This reference summary explains what ADHD is. It focuses on children with ADHD and covers the symptoms, causes and treatment options for ADHD.

ADHD

Every person may go through a period where he or she cannot focus well or becomes hyperactive. This is especially true of children and teens. It is normal for people who are anxious or excited to become hyperactive. It is not normal for people to have ongoing hyperactivity or trouble focusing. If a child finds it difficult to pay attention or is hyperactive over a long period of time and in many places, then it may be possible he or she has ADHD.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

ADHD stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. But not every person who has ADHD is both hyperactive and lacking focus. People with ADHD are affected differently by it and have different symptoms. Some are mostly inattentive, others are mostly hyperactive, and a third group is both inattentive and hyperactive. The majority have both attention deficit and hyperactivity. Inattentiveness is also known as attention deficit.

Nearly everyone shows some of these behaviors at times. But in people with ADHD these behaviors last more than 6 months and cause problems in different settings such as school, home and friendships.

ADHD is sometimes abbreviated ADD. ADHD is the modern term. But both ADHD and ADD mean the same disorder.

Teens with ADHD can have a tough time. School may be a struggle. Some teens with ADHD take too many risks or break rules. But like children with ADHD, teens can get better with treatment. Many children and teens show tremendous improvements in performance, self-esteem and inter-personal skills after receiving ADHD medication and behavioral therapy.



Adult ADHD

Adults cannot suddenly develop ADHD. They should have had it when they were young. If they did not, it means the diagnosis of ADHD was missed when they were young.

The majority of children continue to have ADHD as they grow older. They do not usually grow out of it. But they do learn how to manage it better. Like ADHD in children and teens, ADHD in adults can make life challenging. ADHD can make it hard for adults to feel organized, stick with a job or get to work on time. Adults with ADHD may have trouble in relationships. The disorder can also make adults feel restless.



ADHD in adults can be diagnosed and treated. For some adults, learning that they have ADHD can be a relief. Being able to connect ADHD to longtime problems helps adults understand that they can get better.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Symptoms

Most symptoms of ADHD look like normal behaviors if they happen infrequently or over a short period of time. But in ADHD, symptoms are severe and happen over a long period of time in different settings. These symptoms impair the child's performance at school and relationships with family and friends.

The symptoms of ADHD are grouped under three types: inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity. Symptoms usually begin affecting children in the first five or six years of their lives.

Inattentiveness or attention deficit symptoms are the most common characteristic of children with ADHD. The child cannot keep his or her attention focused on a task.

Children with attention deficit may:

- Get distracted easily.
- Have trouble with following directions.
- Not listen attentively.
- Avoid tasks that require mental effort.

Attention deficit may cause children to make careless mistakes or forget to finish certain tasks like homework or house chores.

These children may:

- Forget where they put their toys, books and school supplies.
- Switch too quickly from one activity to the next without finishing the first.
- Have trouble finishing school assignments.
- Forget to do their chores.

Hyperactivity is another symptom of ADHD. Children are expected to run, climb and have extra energy when compared to adults. But hyperactive behavior in children with ADHD means excessive hyperactive behavior.



This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Children with hyperactivity may:

- Run around a lot.
- Jump from their seat when eating or doing homework.
- Fidget, squirm and shake their feet and legs a lot, especially when asked to be seated in school.
- Touch and play with everything they see.

Impulsivity is another symptom of ADHD. Children with ADHD show impulsive behaviors, or behaviors that come from sudden desires rather than careful thought.

Children with impulsivity may:

- Have difficulty waiting for their turn or in line.
- Blurt out inappropriate comments.
- Interrupt others inappropriately.

Children with impulsivity may:

- Talk nonstop.
- Answer a question before hearing the question that has been asked.
- Take needless risks that may cause injuries.



Most children with ADHD have inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity. But some may have more attention deficit than hyperactivity while others may have more hyperactivity than attention deficit.

Children with ADHD may do things that make others think of them as lazy, unintelligent or inconsiderate. This can affect their self-esteem. It is important to remember that they are not doing it on purpose. Children with ADHD have difficulty controlling their behavior. Medication and behavior therapy can help manage the effects of ADHD.

If not treated, people with ADHD continue to have symptoms of inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity. But some are more successful than others at managing the symptoms. This may explain why it looks like about a third of children with ADHD outgrow ADHD later in life.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Causes

Health care providers do not know for sure what causes ADHD. ADHD is likely caused by more than one thing.

More boys are diagnosed with ADHD than girls. For this reason, gender may play a role in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Being male could be a risk factor for the disorder.

Heredity is one known cause of ADHD. Children who have parents or close relatives with ADHD are more likely to have ADHD.

More research is needed to find the exact causes of ADHD. Some other possible causes are:

- Smoking and drinking alcohol during pregnancy.
- Lead in old paint and plumbing parts.
- Serious brain injuries.



Some people think vaccines or too much sugar cause ADHD. But most research does not support the idea that sugar or vaccines cause ADHD. Poor parenting is also not a cause of ADHD.

Diagnosis

It can take months for a health care provider or specialist to know if a child has ADHD. This is because children are inattentive and hyperactive at times. For ADHD to be suspected, your child's behaviors must be more severe than other children in the same age group.

There are several criteria that health care providers look for before diagnosing a child as having ADHD. These include:

- How severe the behaviors are.
- For how long the behaviors have happened.
- Where the behaviors happen.
- The effect of the behaviors.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Health care providers will talk to parents and teachers to find out which signs of attention deficit, hyperactivity and impulsivity a child has. The behavior is considered in light of the child's age. For instance, it is normal for a two-year old to have difficulty sitting and paying attention to directions.



If the behavior happened after a stressful event, such as a divorce or a move, it is not regarded as a symptom of ADHD. It also does not count if the behavior only happens sporadically. The child must show signs of ADHD frequently and over a long period of time.

The behavior must happen in multiple settings for ADHD to be suspected. If a child does not pay attention to a parent's directions but is attentive at school, it is more likely a relational problem with the parent. If a child is not paying attention at school but is attentive elsewhere, the problem is most likely related to the school setting.

If a child's behavior doesn't cause serious damage or impairment, then health care providers are unlikely to diagnose ADHD. For instance, if the child is hyperactive and forgetful but manages to learn and pass classes, health care providers may not diagnose ADHD.

Many behavioral disorders have signs similar to ADHD. They include depressive disorder, bipolar disorder and anxiety disorder. Health care providers need time to observe a child to determine if the child has a mood disorder only or ADHD with a mood disorder. Many people with ADHD can have other behavior disorders.



Diagnosing a child with ADHD may be difficult if the child has a specific type of ADHD, such as a case of attention deficit but no hyperactivity. For example, a child may seem well-behaved. But he or she is actually having a hard time paying attention and is often distracted.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

If your child is having trouble at school or at home and has been for a long time, ask his or her health care provider about ADHD. Be as honest and thorough as possible about your child's behaviors so he or she can get treatment if he or she has ADHD. The health care provider also may want to talk to your family, your child's teachers and others involved in your child's life. This gives your health care provider a better understanding of your child's behaviors.

Diagnosing adult ADHD requires that the symptoms began during childhood. If the symptoms didn't start until adulthood, it is not ADHD but another disorder.

Without a childhood diagnosis of ADHD, health care providers must use records from school performance or the recollection of family members regarding childhood behavior to diagnose adult ADHD.

Treatment

ADHD cannot be cured. But it can be successfully managed. In most cases, ADHD is treated with medication and behavioral therapy.

The usual course of treatment may include medications such as methylphenidate or dextroamphetamine. These are stimulants that decrease impulsivity and hyperactivity and increase attention. An example of a methylphenidate is Ritalin®. An example of a dextroamphetamine is Dexedrin®. Common ADHD medication may not work for every person. Some may have side effects such as sleep problems, loss of appetite and stomach aches. The health care provider needs to monitor and make adjustments along the way.



Parents should follow-up with the health care provider and communicate to him or her how the child is responding to the medication.

The health care provider will make adjustments to the medication dose or may even change the medication. In some cases, he or she may recommend a non-stimulant or an antidepressant medication.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.

Most experts agree that treatment for ADHD should not be limited to the use of medications alone. Treatment should include behavioral therapy. In behavioral therapy, the therapist works with the parents to develop methods to replace undesirable behaviors of the child with the desired behavior. This is done through a system of rewards and discipline. Rewards are more effective in changing problem behaviors than disciplining.



There is a lot of parent involvement with behavioral therapy. Teachers and other childcare workers should also be included. Each behavioral therapy plan is specifically designed for the child, taking into consideration the child's specific problem behavior and the environmental conditions at home and at school.

Summary

ADHD is a common behavior disorder where a person shows signs of excessive inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Nearly everyone shows some of the behaviors associated with ADHD at times. But in people with ADHD these behaviors last more than 6 months and cause problems in different settings such as school, home and friendships.

No one knows exactly what causes ADHD. It runs in families, so genetics may be a factor. A complete evaluation by a trained professional is the only way to know for sure if your child has ADHD.



Treatment for ADHD often includes medicines to control symptoms. Structure at home and at school is also important. Parenting classes or behavioral therapy may also help.

This document is for informational purposes and is not intended to be a substitute for the advice of a doctor or healthcare professional or a recommendation for any particular treatment plan. Like any printed material, it may become out of date over time. It is important that you rely on the advice of a doctor or a healthcare professional for your specific condition.