

# Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

## What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common mental disorders affecting children. ADHD is a brain condition that is often first identified in school-aged children when it causes disruption in the classroom or problems with schoolwork. An estimated 3 to 7 percent of school-aged children have symptoms of ADHD.

ADHD can affect adults too. While some children seem to outgrow the disorder, or learn to compensate for the symptoms, others do not.

## Symptoms and Diagnosis

Many ADHD symptoms, such as high activity levels, difficulty remaining still for long periods and limited attention spans, are common to young children in general. The difference in children with ADHD is that their hyperactivity and inattention are noticeably greater than expected for their age and interfere with functioning at home, at school, or with friends.

A child with ADHD may

- \* squirm and fidget,
- \* daydream a lot,
- \* have difficulty following instructions,
- \* appear to not listen when being spoken to,
- \* not be able to stay seated,
- \* talk too much/interrupt, or
- \* be easily distracted.

Diagnosing ADHD can be challenging because the symptoms differ from child to child: for some children hyperactivity is significant, others struggle more with paying attention. For the majority, the symptoms cause problems. There is no lab test for ADHD. Diagnosis involves gathering information from parents, teachers, and others, often filling out checklists, and a medical evaluation (including vision and hearing screening) to rule out other medical problems.

## Causes of ADHD

Scientists have not yet identified the specific causes of ADHD. There is evidence that genetics contribute to ADHD. For example, 3 out of 4 children with ADHD have a relative with the disorder. Other factors that may contribute to the development of ADHD include being born prematurely; brain injury; and the mother smoking, using alcohol, or having extreme stress during pregnancy.

## ADHD Treatment

Behavioral therapy and medication can improve the symptoms of ADHD. Studies have found that a combination of behavioral therapy and medication works best for most patients.

### THERAPY

Behavioral therapy focuses on managing the symptoms of ADHD. Therapy usually consists of teaching parents and teachers how to provide positive feedback for desired behaviors and consequences for negative ones. Although behavioral therapy requires careful coordination, it can help children learn how to control their behavior.

### MEDICATION

There are two main types of medication for ADHD: stimulants and non-stimulants.

Stimulant medications are highly effective treatments that have been safely used for decades. They include methylphenidate (which is sold under brand names Ritalin, Concerta, Metadate, and Focalin) and amphetamines (sold as Dexedrine, Vyvanse, and Adderall). As with all medicines, children taking these drugs must be carefully monitored by their parents and doctors.

Atomoxetine (Strattera) and guanfacine (Intuniv) are non-stimulants that have also been shown to be effective in the treatment of ADHD symptoms. These medications are alternatives for those who do not respond well to stimulants or if a non-stimulant is preferred.

Some children experience dramatic relief of symptoms with medication and this relief continues with ongoing

treatment. Other children may experience only partial relief or the medication may seem to stop working. A change in medication or adjustment in dose may improve the response. Other children and families may benefit from additional therapy specific to problem behaviors.

## PARENTING

Children who have ADHD tend to benefit from structure, established routines, and clear expectations. It may be helpful to

- \* maintain routines,
- \* make sure instructions are understood – use simple words/demonstrate,
- \* focus on your child when talking to him/her,
- \* maintain communication with the child's teacher,
- \* model calm behavior, and
- \* focus on effort and reward good behavior.

## Consequences of Untreated ADHD

If left untreated, children with ADHD are at greater risk for potentially serious consequences, including school failure and dropout, behavioral and discipline problems, social difficulties, family problems, alcohol and drug abuse, and depression. Similar problems can persist into adulthood, including relationship and employment problems.

## ADHD and the School-Aged Child

Teachers and school staff can provide parents and doctors with information to help evaluate behavior and learning problems and can assist with behavioral training. However, school staff cannot diagnose ADHD, make decisions about treatment, or require that a student take medication to attend school. Only parents and guardians can make those decisions with the child's physician.

Students whose ADHD impairs their learning may qualify for special education services through their school. Children with ADHD can benefit from study skills instruction, changes to the classroom setup, alternative teaching techniques, and a modified curriculum.

# Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

LET'S  
TALK  
FACTS  
ABOUT



## Healthy Minds. Healthy Lives.

 AMERICAN  
PSYCHIATRIC  
ASSOCIATION  
[www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)

  
AMERICAN  
PSYCHIATRIC  
ASSOCIATION

1000 Wilson Blvd., Suite 1825  
Arlington, VA 22209-3901



## ADHD and Adults

Many adults with ADHD do not realize they have the disorder. Common symptoms in adults include difficulty following directions, remembering information, concentrating, organizing tasks, or completing work within time limits. Adults with ADHD are treated with medication, psychotherapy, or a combination. Behavior management strategies, such as ways to minimize distractions and improve organization, can also be helpful.

## Resources

For more information, please contact:

### American Psychiatric Association (APA)

1000 Wilson Blvd.  
Suite 1825  
Arlington, VA 22209  
703-907-7300  
[www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org)

### Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

National Resource Center on AD/HD  
8181 Professional Place, Suite 150  
Landover, MD 20785  
800-233-4050  
[www.chadd.org](http://www.chadd.org)

### American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP)

3615 Wisconsin Ave., N.W.  
Washington, DC 20016  
202-966-7300  
[www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org)

### National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

6001 Executive Blvd. Rm. 8184  
Bethesda, MD 20892  
866-415-8051  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

## Ordering Information

Brochures may be ordered by visiting [www.appi.org](http://www.appi.org) or calling 800-368-5777. The brochures are sold by topic in packets of 50. Discount pricing is available for bulk quantities of five or more packets. Please email [bulksales@psych.org](mailto:bulksales@psych.org) for more information. APA physician members receive a 10% discount.

One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect opinion or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit [www.healthyminds.org](http://www.healthyminds.org).

© Copyright 2009 American Psychiatric Association