

Facts

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a condition characterized by an attention span that is less than expected for the age of the person; there is often also age-inappropriate hyperactivity and impulsive behavior. Some use the term ADD, (Attention Deficit Disorder), to refer to the predominantly inattentive type of ADHD, since that type does not feature hyperactive symptoms. Others use the terms ADD and ADHD interchangeably, but ADHD is the only “official” term for the disorder.

The most commonly diagnosed behavior disorder in young persons, ADHD affects an estimated 5%, or 6.1 million, of American children aged 2-17, an average of at least one child in every classroom. In general, boys with ADHD outnumber girls with the disorder by about three to one. The combined type of ADHD is the most common in elementary school-age boys, while the predominantly inattentive type is found more often in adolescent girls. The disorder is sometimes not diagnosed until adolescence or adulthood, and half the children with ADHD have symptoms of the disorder throughout their lives.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) also had another mental, emotional, or behavioral disorder, such as conduct disorder, anxiety, depression, autism, and Tourette syndrome.

Signs & Symptoms

Deciding if a child has ADHD is a several-step process. There is no single test to diagnose ADHD, and many other problems, like sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, and certain types of learning disabilities, can have similar symptoms.

People with ADHD show a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development:

- **Inattention** — An inability to focus on things such as reading, listening, or playing a game. Someone with ADHD is often distracted by noises, movement, smells, or their thoughts. They may give effortless, automatic attention to activities and things they enjoy, but focusing attention to organizing and finishing a task or learning something new is difficult.

- **Hyperactivity and Impulsivity**—

Often fidgets with or taps hands or feet, or squirms in seat; leaves seat in situations when remaining seated is expected. Often runs about or climbs in situations where it is not appropriate (adolescents or adults may be limited to

feeling restless). Often unable to play or take part in leisure activities quietly. Is often “on the go” acting as if “driven by a motor”. Often talks excessively or blurts out an answer before a question has been completed. Often has trouble waiting his/her turn. Often interrupts or intrudes on others (e.g., butts into conversations or games)

ADHD is a complex condition. One person may have very different symptoms than another person with ADHD. Not all healthcare professionals distinguish between types of ADHD in the same way. Several of the symptoms must be present in two or more settings (such as at home, school, or work; with friends and relatives). Based on the types of symptoms, three kinds (presentations) can occur:

- **Predominantly Inattentive Type** — Individuals with this type often fail to pay close attention to details or make careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities; have difficulty sustaining attention to tasks or leisure activities; do not seem to listen when spoken to directly; do not follow through on instructions and fail to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace; have difficulty organizing tasks and activities; avoid, dislike, or hesitate to do things that require sustained mental effort; lose things necessary for tasks or activities; are easily distracted; are forgetful in daily activities. This type is mostly found in girls.

- **Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Type** — These individuals often fidget with their hands or feet, or squirm in their seat; leave their seat when they shouldn’t; move excessively or feel restless during situations in which such behavior is not allowed; have difficulty quietly engaging in leisure activities; are constantly ‘on the go’; talk excessively; blurt out answers before questions have been completed; have difficulty waiting their turn; interrupt or intrude on others. This type of ADHD is mostly found in younger children.

- **Combined Type** — Those with the combined type, the most common one, have both the inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive symptoms.

Not everyone who is overly hyperactive, inattentive, or impulsive has an attention disorder. To figure out whether a person has ADHD, specialists consider several critical questions: Are these behaviors excessive, long-term, and pervasive, i.e., do they occur more often than in other people the same age? Are they a continuous problem, not just a response to a temporary situation? Do the behaviors occur in several settings or only in one specific place, like the playground or the classroom? The person’s pattern of behavior is compared against a set of criteria

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and characteristics of the disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5).

Causes

ADHD is not caused by dysfunctional parenting. Scientists are not sure what causes ADHD, although many studies suggest that genes play a large role. Like many other illnesses, ADHD probably results from a combination of factors. In addition to genetics, researchers are looking at possible environmental factors. Studies suggest a potential link between a pregnant woman's cigarette smoking and alcohol use during pregnancy and ADHD in children. In addition, preschoolers who are exposed to high levels of lead, which can sometimes be found in plumbing fixtures or paint in old buildings, have a higher risk of developing ADHD. Children who have suffered a brain injury may show some behaviors similar to those of ADHD. However, only a small percentage of children with ADHD have suffered a traumatic brain injury. Scientists are also studying how nutrition might contribute to ADHD. The idea that refined sugar causes ADHD or makes symptoms worse is popular, but more research discounts this theory than supports it.

Treatment

Many treatments have been recommended for individuals with ADHD, some with good scientific basis, some without. It is important for parents to remember that ADHD can be successfully managed. There are many treatment options, so parents should work closely with everyone involved in the child's life—healthcare providers, therapists, teachers, coaches, and other family members. Taking advantage of all the resources available will help parents guide their child towards success.

Research shows that behavior therapy is an important part of treatment for children with ADHD. ADHD affects not only a child's ability to pay attention or sit still at school, it also affects relationships with family and other children. Children with ADHD often show behaviors that can be very disruptive to others. Behavior therapy is a treatment option that can help reduce these behaviors. It is often helpful to start behavior therapy as soon as a diagnosis is made.

The goals of behavior therapy are to learn or strengthen positive behaviors and eliminate unwanted or problem behaviors. Behavior therapy can include behavior therapy training for parents, behavior therapy with children, or a combination. Teachers can also use behavior therapy to help reduce problem behaviors in the classroom.

In parent training in behavior therapy, parents learn new skills or strengthen their existing skills to teach and guide their children and to manage their behavior. Parent training in behavior therapy has been shown to strengthen the relationship between the parent and child, and to decrease children's negative or problem behaviors. Parent training in behavior therapy is also known as behavior management training for parents, parent behavior therapy, behavioral parent training, or just parent training. One evidence based practice is Child Parent Psychotherapy.

In behavior therapy with children, the therapist works with the child to learn new behaviors to replace behaviors

that don't work or cause problems. The therapist may also help the child learn to express feelings in ways that do not create problems for the child or other people.

Medication can help children with ADHD in their everyday life, and medication treatment may be an effective way to manage ADHD symptoms. Medication is an option that may help control some of the behavior problems that have led to trouble in the past with family, friends and at school. Several different types of medications are FDA-approved to treat ADHD in children. **Stimulants** are the best-known and most widely used. Between 70-80 percent of children with ADHD have fewer ADHD symptoms when they take these fast-acting medications. **Nonstimulants** do not work as quickly as stimulants, but they can last up to 24 hours.

Medications can affect children differently. One child may respond well to one medication, but not another. The health care provider may need to try different medications and doses, so it is important for parents to work with their child's provider to find the medication that works best for their child.

Helping Yourself

Life can be hard if you have ADHD. You may often have trouble paying attention to instructions, finishing tasks, relating with other people, or staying calm. You may be labeled a "bad kid" at school and have difficulties with relationships with people your age. These things can lead to low self-esteem and discouragement. It is important to learn about ADHD, find ways to feel good about yourself, and feel successful. Following your treatment plan and finding someone you trust to share your feelings with is a good start.

Helping Someone Else

- Sharing experiences with those with similar problems helps people realize they aren't alone. Therefore, many adults with ADHD and parents of children with ADHD find it useful to join a support group to share frustrations and successes, what works, as well as their hopes for themselves and their children.
- Parenting skills training, offered by therapists or in special classes, gives parents tools and techniques for managing their child's behavior. Parents may also learn to use stress management methods, such as relaxation techniques and exercise, to increase their own tolerance for frustration, so they are better able to respond calmly to their child's behavior.
- In addition, parents may learn to structure situations in ways that allow their child to succeed. Increasing clarity, structure, and predictability helps create an environment in which the child can succeed. This may include developing clearly defined rules, consequences, and rewards to help children know what is expected of them; organizing the home environment so that there is "a place for everything, with everything in its place"; maintaining a consistent daily schedule; or, helping the child learn to divide a large task into small steps.

Sources:

- *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/adhd/>*
- *National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov*
- *American Psychiatric Association, www.psych.org*
- *National Alliance on Mental Illness, www.nami.org*