

Evidence-based Practice Center Systematic Review Draft Protocol

Project Title: Diagnosis of Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adults: A Systematic Review

Initial Publication Date: August 2024

I. Background and Objectives for the Systematic Review

Background and Context:

ADHD is defined by persistent symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Diagnosis is based on DSM-5 criteria, which require symptoms to begin before age 12 and occur in multiple settings, causing significant impairment. However, recent research suggests ADHD can sometimes first manifest in adulthood, with prevalence estimates reaching as high as 6.7% when childhood onset is not required for diagnosis^{8–14}.

Challenges in Diagnosing ADHD in Adults:

Diagnosing ADHD in adults is particularly difficult due to several factors:

- Hyperactivity and impulsivity, which are more outwardly noticeable in childhood, often diminish during adolescence, making adult symptoms more subtle and harder to detect²².
- Symptoms of inattention, such as distractibility, poor organization, and forgetfulness, may only become apparent in adulthood, especially in complex settings like work or personal relationships²².
- ADHD symptoms overlap with other mental health disorders, including depression, bipolar disorder, anxiety, psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders^{23,24}, complicating differential diagnosis. Additionally, stimulant misuse by those seeking cognitive enhancement, particularly students and professionals, has led to concerns about feigned symptoms^{25–30}.

Primary care physicians (PCPs), rather than specialists, often manage ADHD diagnosis, which can further complicate accuracy, as PCPs may lack the experience to effectively distinguish ADHD from other conditions³⁵.

Existing Guidelines and Diagnostic Tools:

There are currently no U.S. guidelines for diagnosing ADHD in adults, although guidelines from Australia do exist. The lack of standardized tools contributes to uncertainty, as diagnostic methods vary in reliability and performance. Structured diagnostic interviews, while more reliable than casual assessments, remain imperfect^{31–33}, making it challenging to establish a “gold-standard” diagnostic approach. This uncertainty has led to controversies regarding whether ADHD is over- or under-diagnosed in adult populations²².

Key Considerations:

Accurate diagnosis requires experienced clinicians, supported by reliable tools, to differentiate ADHD from other disorders. Further research is needed to assess the effectiveness of diagnostic tools and to develop appropriate diagnostic criteria for adults, given that the DSM-5 criteria were primarily developed for children^{8–10,41,42}.