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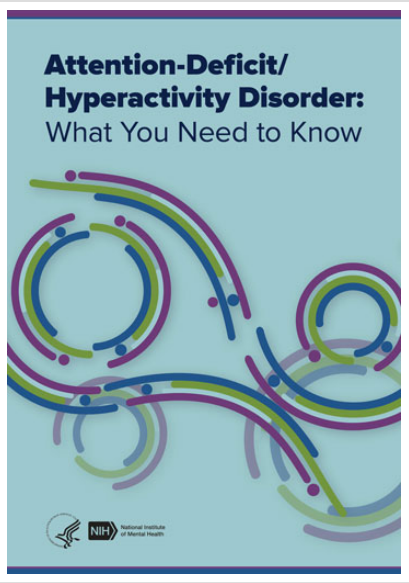
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Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: What You Need to Know

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a developmental disorder marked by persistent symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Some people mostly have symptoms of inattention. Others mostly have symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity. Some people have both types of symptoms.

Symptoms begin in childhood and can interfere with daily life, including social relationships and school or work performance. ADHD is well-known among children and teens, but many adults also have the disorder. Effective treatments are available to manage symptoms.



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What are the symptoms of ADHD?

People with ADHD may experience an ongoing pattern of:

- **Inattention:** Difficulty paying attention
- **Hyperactivity:** Showing too much energy or moving and talking too much
- **Impulsivity:** Acting without thinking or having difficulty with self-control

Signs of inattention can include frequent difficulty with:

- Paying attention to details, leading to careless mistakes at school, work, or during other activities
- Concentrating on tasks or activities, for instance, while having conversations, taking tests, completing assignments, or reading papers
- Listening when spoken to directly
- Following instructions or finishing tasks at school, work, or home
- Organizing tasks and activities, managing time, and meeting deadlines
- Completing tasks that require sustained attention, such as homework, large projects, and complicated forms
- Losing things, such as backpacks, books, keys, wallets, and phones
- Getting easily distracted by unrelated thoughts or stimuli
- Forgetting about daily activities, such as chores, errands, and events, or other important things, like assignments, appointments, and phone calls

Signs of hyperactivity and impulsivity can include often:

- Fidgeting, tapping hands or feet, or squirming while seated
- Moving around when expected to remain seated, such as in the classroom or office, or feeling restless in these situations
- Running, climbing, or moving around at times when it is not appropriate
- Being constantly “on the go” and acting as if driven by a motor
- Being unable to quietly play or take part in hobbies and activities
- Talking excessively
- Answering questions before they are fully asked or finishing other people's sentences
- Struggling to wait or be patient, such as when playing a game or waiting in line
- Interrupting or intruding on others, for example, in conversations, games, or meetings

What causes ADHD?

Researchers are not sure what causes ADHD, although many studies suggest that genes play a large role. Like many other disorders, ADHD probably results from a combination of factors.

In addition to genetics, researchers are looking at differences in brain development and neurobiology among people with ADHD compared to those without the disorder. They are also studying environmental factors that might increase the risk of developing ADHD, including brain injuries, nutrition, and social environments.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

Based on their specific symptoms, a person can be diagnosed with one of three types of ADHD:

- **Inattentive:** Mostly symptoms of inattention but not hyperactivity or impulsivity



ADHD symptoms must begin in childhood (before age 12). Symptoms often continue into the teen years and adulthood. The criterion for a diagnosis differs slightly based on age.

- Children up to 16 years must show at least six symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, or both.
- Adults and youth over 16 years must show at least five symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, or both.

To be diagnosed with ADHD, a person’s symptoms must also:

- Occur for at least 6 months
- Be present in two or more settings (for example, at home, at work, in school, or with friends)
- Interfere with or impair social, school, or work functioning

Stress, sleep disorders, anxiety, depression, and other physical conditions or illnesses can cause similar symptoms to those of ADHD. A health care provider needs to do a thorough evaluation to determine the cause of symptoms, make a diagnosis, and identify effective treatments.

Primary care providers sometimes diagnose and treat ADHD, or they may refer the person to a mental health professional. During an evaluation, a provider usually:

- Examines the person’s mental health and medical history, including their mood and past or current health conditions.
- Looks at the person’s current or, if an adult, childhood behavior and school experiences. To obtain this information, the provider may ask for permission to talk with family, friends, partners, teachers, and others who know the person well and have seen them in different settings to learn about behaviors and experiences at home, school, or elsewhere.
- Uses standardized behavior rating scales or ADHD symptom checklists to determine whether the person meets the criteria for a diagnosis of ADHD.
- Administers psychological tests that look at cognitive skills, such as working memory, executive functioning (abilities such as planning and decision-making), visual and spatial abilities, or reasoning. Such tests can help identify psychological or cognitive (thinking-related) strengths and challenges and identify or rule out possible learning disabilities.

Does ADHD look the same in everyone?

Anyone can have ADHD. However, boys and men tend to display more hyperactive and impulsive symptoms, while girls and women are more likely to be diagnosed with inattentive ADHD.

ADHD can also be diagnosed at any age, although symptoms must have begun in childhood (before age 12). Adults with ADHD often have a history of problems with school, work, and relationships.

ADHD symptoms may change as a person gets older.

- **Children** show hyperactivity and impulsivity as the most common symptoms. As academic and social demands increase, symptoms of inattention often become more prominent and begin to interfere with academic performance and peer relationships.
- **Adolescents** usually show less hyperactivity and may appear as restless or fidgeting. Symptoms of inattention and impulsivity typically continue and may cause academic, organizational, or relationship challenges. Teens with ADHD are more likely to engage in impulsive, risky behaviors, such as substance use and unsafe sexual activity.
- **Adults, including older adults**, can show inattention, restlessness, and impulsivity, although, in some people, those symptoms become less severe and less impairing. They may also be irritable, have a low tolerance for frustration and stress, or experience frequent or intense mood changes.

Some adults may not have been diagnosed with ADHD when younger because their teachers or family did not recognize the disorder, they had a mild form of the disorder, or they managed well until experiencing the demands of adulthood. But it is never too late to seek a diagnosis and treatment for ADHD and other mental health conditions that may co-occur with it. Effective treatment can make day-to-day life easier for people with ADHD and their families.

How is ADHD treated?

Although there is no cure for ADHD, current treatments may help reduce symptoms and improve functioning. Common treatments for ADHD are medication, psychotherapy, and other behavioral interventions. For children, treatment often includes parent education and school-based programs.

Researchers are studying new treatments for people with ADHD, such as cognitive training and neurofeedback. These options are usually explored only after medication and psychotherapy have already been tried. For many people, treatment involves a combination of elements.

Medication

Stimulants are the most common type of medication used to treat ADHD, and research shows them to be highly effective. They work by increasing levels of brain chemicals involved in thinking and attention.

Like all medications, stimulants can have side effects and must be prescribed and monitored by a health care provider. Tell the provider about other medications you or your child are taking. Medications for common health problems, such as diabetes, anxiety, and depression, can interact with stimulants, in which case, a provider can suggest other medication options.

Health care providers sometimes prescribe nonstimulant medications like antidepressants to treat ADHD. However, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has not approved these medications specifically for ADHD. Sometimes, a person must try several different medications or dosages before finding the one that works

How can I find help?

If you’re unsure of where to get help, a health care provider is a good place to start. They can refer you to a qualified mental health professional, such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, or clinical social worker, who can help figure out the next steps. Find [tips for talking with a health care provider](#) about your or your child’s mental health.

The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) has information about ADHD symptoms, diagnosis, and treatment, as well as additional resources for families and providers.

You can [learn more about getting help](#) on the NIMH website. You can also learn about [finding support](#) and [locating mental health services](#) in your area on the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) website.

How can I help myself?

Medication and therapy are the most effective treatments for ADHD. Other strategies may also help manage symptoms.

- Get regular exercise, especially when feeling hyperactive or restless.
- Eat regular, healthy meals.
- Get plenty of sleep. Try to turn off screens at least 1 hour before bedtime and get between 7–9 hours of sleep every night.
- Stick to a consistent routine.
- Work on time management and organization. Prioritize time-sensitive tasks and write down assignments, messages, appointments, reminders, and important thoughts.
- Take short breaks during tasks that require sustained attention to help maintain focus and prevent burnout. Break large tasks into smaller, more manageable steps.
- Connect with people and maintain relationships. Schedule activities with friends, particularly supportive people who understand your challenges with ADHD.
- Take medications as directed. Avoid alcohol, tobacco, and drugs not prescribed for you.

How can I help my child?

- Be patient, flexible, and understanding. ADHD can be frustrating both for people who have it and the people in their lives. ADHD may make it hard for your child to perform certain tasks or behaviors. Some children may need to use different strategies to help them succeed.
- Use clear, simple, direct language to explain rules and expectations. Reward behaviors that meet these expectations with positive reinforcement. Provide consistent praise or rewards for acting in a desired way.
- Offer practical help, such as on tasks like cleaning and organizing, or simply be present and engaged while your child works, which can give them a sense of accountability and motivation and help them stay focused and on track.
- Provide opportunities to explore different activities and interests. Help your child discover their unique talents and build confidence in their abilities.

If you or someone you know is struggling or having thoughts of suicide, call or text the [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) at **988** or chat at [988lifeline.org](#). In life-threatening situations, call **911**.

What are clinical trials and why are they important?

Clinical trials are research studies that look at ways to prevent, detect, or treat diseases and conditions. These studies help show whether a treatment is safe and effective in people. Some people join clinical trials to help doctors and researchers learn more about a disease and improve health care. Other people, such as those with health conditions, join to try treatments that aren’t widely available.

NIMH supports clinical trials across the United States. Talk to a health care provider about clinical trials and whether one is right for you. Learn more about [participating in clinical trials](#).

For more information

Learn more about [mental health disorders and topics](#). For information about various health topics, visit the [National Library of Medicine’s MedlinePlus](#).

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