

# Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in Adults

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## KEY POINTS

- Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder is a condition that causes problems paying attention, being unable to sit still, and doing things without thinking first.
  - Treatment may include learning coping skills, behavioral training, and medicines.
  - Exercising, yoga, meditation, and learning other ways to relax may also be helpful when used along with medicines and therapy.
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## What is ADHD?

Attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that causes problems paying attention (inattentive), trouble sitting still (hyperactive), and doing things without thinking first (impulsive). ADHD is usually diagnosed in childhood, but it can continue into adulthood.

ADHD used to be called attention deficit disorder (ADD).

## What is the cause?

The exact cause of this disorder is not known. ADHD seems to run in families. People with this disorder may have physical changes in their brain. These changes may mean that some parts of the brain are more active or less active than in other people.

There is no evidence that ADHD is caused by vaccines, sugar, or things added to foods such as preservatives and coloring. Allergies are not a common factor in causing ADHD either.

## What are the symptoms?

There are 3 main types of ADHD:

- **Problems paying attention (inattentive).** Symptoms may include:
  - Being distracted by what is going on around you
  - Starting many projects but not finishing them
  - Trouble learning new tasks or following instructions
  - Forgetting or losing things
  - Daydreaming and getting confused easily
- **Problems sitting still and doing things without thinking first (hyperactive and impulsive).** Symptoms may include:
  - Fidgeting and getting bored very quickly

- Acting or reacting to things quickly and without thinking of the outcome
- Talking nonstop, interrupting other people who are talking, or speaking without thinking
- Being impatient or unable to wait your turn
- Being very restless or unable to keep still
- **Combined type** symptoms may include a combination of being inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive.

Symptoms may change from childhood to adulthood. The most common changes during the teen years are less hyperactivity and better self-control. Being easily distracted is most common in adults. Adults who had behavior problems in childhood may continue to have problems with aggression. Some adults with ADHD who had learning problems in childhood continue to have problems with reading, writing, or math.

People with ADHD may also have problems with:

- Depression, self-harm, or thoughts of suicide
- Anxiety
- Substance abuse
- Impulse control disorders such as gambling addiction or compulsive eating

## **How is it diagnosed?**

ADHD is usually diagnosed in childhood.

Your healthcare provider or therapist will ask about your symptoms, medical and family history, and any medicines you are taking. Your provider will check for a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause or add to the symptoms.

You and others close to you may be asked questions about ADHD symptoms. You may see a mental health professional to check for other problems in addition to ADHD.

## **How is it treated?**

The treatment of ADHD may involve:

- **Learning coping skills:** You will learn to manage situations that distract or over-excite you. You may need more structure and daily routines than other people. You may want to use a day planner or a tablet computer to organize your life.
- **Behavioral training:** Behavior therapy may help you learn how to pay attention for longer periods and set up routines to help.
- **Medicine:** Stimulant medicines appear to increase activity in the self-control areas of the brain so that you can pay attention better and focus on activities. If these medicines are not effective or cause unwanted side effects, there are other medicines that can help with ADHD. If you also have depression, anxiety or another diagnosis, you may need other medicines.

Do not try nonprescription medicines, diets, or other alternative treatments. Claims have been made that certain herbal and dietary products or diet changes help control ADHD symptoms. No herbal or dietary supplements have been proven to consistently or completely relieve the symptoms of ADHD. Supplements are not tested or standardized and may vary in strengths and effects. They may have side effects and are not always safe. Before changing your diet or taking any supplement, talk with your healthcare provider.

Being physically active and learning ways to relax may help. Yoga and meditation may also be helpful. You may want to talk with your healthcare provider about using these methods along with medicines and therapy.

You may grow out of some symptoms but may still have trouble paying attention. You may continue to have relationship problems and trouble keeping up with the things you need to do at home and at work. However, people with ADHD can do well at jobs that reward high energy.

## **How can I take care of myself?**

There are many ways to help manage ADHD:

- When you need to read or concentrate, try to stay away from the sounds of television, radio, or others talking. You might try playing low-level background sound such as white noise or instrumental music.
- Do tasks in short blocks of time with breaks in between. Use checklists, timers, or alarms to help you stay on task.
- Follow a structured daily routine at home and work. Get help organizing your work, chores, and other activities.
- If you have trouble slowing down at bedtime, planned quiet time before bedtime and background music when falling asleep are often helpful.
- Keep a stress ball, worry beads, worry stones, or a doodle pad with you that you can "fidget with" to help you stay focused.
- Get support. Talk with family and friends. Consider joining a support group in your area.
- Learn to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax. For example, take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try yoga, meditation, or deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- Take care of your physical health. Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a variety of healthy foods. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs because they can make your symptoms worse. Stay physically active as advised by your provider.
- Check your medicines. To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take all medicines as directed by your provider or therapist. It is very important to take your medicine even when you are feeling and thinking well. Without the medicine, your symptoms may not improve or may get worse. Talk to your provider if you have problems taking your medicine or if the medicines don't seem to be working.

- Contact your healthcare provider or therapist if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

For more information, contact:

- Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)  
800-233-4050  
<https://chadd.org/understanding-adhd/>

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