

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 3 to 5%, about two million, of American school-age children, 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.

There is evidence that people with ADHD are more likely to have learning disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, or conduct disorder. These conditions can make it even harder for a child to fit in with peers.

Signs & Symptoms

There are three main signs of ADHD:

- **Inattentiveness** — 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** — Having too much energy to handle. Examples include talking nonstop, being unable to sit still, always moving, and having difficulty falling asleep.
- **Impulsivity** — Acting without thinking. For example, running out in the street after a ball, knocking over a plant while running across the room, or “talking without thinking” about the consequences.

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. Most professionals, however, use the following types:

- **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 and characteristics of the disorder in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (DSM-IV).

Causes

ADHD is not caused by dysfunctional parenting. Strong scientific evidence supports that ADHD is a biologically based disorder. Researchers from the National Institute of Mental Health have observed significantly lower activity in areas of the brain controlling attention, social judgment, and movement in PET scans of those with ADHD than in those without the disorder. Biological studies also suggest that children with ADHD have lower

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levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine in critical regions of the brain.

Other theories suggest that cigarette, alcohol, and drug use during pregnancy, or exposure to environmental toxins, such as lead, may be connected to the development of ADHD. There may also be a genetic basis to ADHD, meaning that the disorder tends to run in families.

While early theories suggested that ADHD was caused by minor head injuries or brain damage resulting from infections or complications at birth, research has found this hypothesis lacking in evidence. Further, studies have not investigated dietary habits, another widely discussed possible influence.

Treatment

Many treatments have been recommended for individuals with ADHD, some with good scientific basis, some without. The most proven treatments are medication and therapy.

Stimulants are the most widely used drugs to treat ADHD. Stimulants increase activity in parts of the brain that are underactive in people with ADHD; they improve attention and reduce impulsive, hyperactive and/or aggressive behavior. Antidepressants, tranquilizers, and the antihypertensive drug clonidine (Catapres) have also proven helpful in some cases. Every person reacts to medication differently, so it is important to work closely with your physician. As useful as these drugs are, their use has sparked a great deal of controversy. While on these medications, some children may lose weight, have less appetite, and temporarily grow more slowly or have problems falling asleep. Many doctors say if they carefully watch the child's height, weight, and overall development, the benefits of medication far outweigh the potential side effects. Another debate is whether drugs are prescribed unnecessarily for too many children. Critics argue that many children who do not have an attention disorder receive prescriptions as a way to control their disruptive behavior.

Several therapeutic intervention approaches are available as well:

- **Psychotherapy** works to help people with ADHD like and accept themselves despite their disorder. In psychotherapy, people talk to a therapist about upsetting thoughts and feelings and self-defeating patterns of behavior and learn other ways to handle their emotions. As they talk, the therapist tries to help them understand how they can change.
- **Cognitive-behavioral therapy** helps people work on immediate issues. Rather than helping people understand their feelings and actions, it helps them change their behavior.
- **Social Skills** training can also help children learn new behaviors. In this approach, the therapist discusses and models appropriate behaviors, then gives children a chance to practice them.

Treatment options NOT scientifically proven to work with ADHD include: biofeedback, special diets, allergy

treatment, megavitamins, chiropractic adjustment, and special-colored glasses.

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

- There is strength in numbers. 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, information about 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. Research has shown that 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:

National Institute of Mental Health
www.nimh.nih.gov

American Psychiatric Association
www.psych.org

National Alliance on Mental Illness
www.nami.org