

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

What is it?

ADHD is an acronym for Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. It is a neurological brain disorder that is marked by a continual pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that is more frequent and severe than what is considered typical for someone of that age.

Does it affect me?

There are two main problems identified with ADHD: (1) Inattention and (2) Hyperactivity / Impulsivity. These problems are further broken down into individual symptoms.

Inattention	Hyperactivity/Impulsivity
Poor attention to detail/carelessness	Fidgetiness/squirminess
Difficulty sustaining attention	Difficulty remaining in seat
Does not appear to listen	Runs about or climbs excessively
Often fails to complete tasks	Difficulty with quiet activities
Difficulty with organization	Often seems “on the go”
Avoids/dislikes focused tasks	Talks excessively
Loses things easily	Blurts out answers or opinions
Easily distracted	Difficulty waiting or taking turns
Forgetful of daily activities	Interrupts or intrudes on others

* It is important to note how **common** and **normal** these symptoms are in adults, being mindful of the overlap they have with other mental and physical health problems.

The symptoms listed above must be:

- **Chronic**: lasting at least six months consistently
- **Present from a young age**: onset must be prior to age 12
- **Observable and problematic across many settings**: for example, at home, school, work, etc.

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How do you find out if you have ADHD?

There is no one test for ADHD, but a comprehensive evaluation completed with a professional is needed to establish a diagnosis. The evaluation is long and requires sustained mental effort to complete. In addition to the testing, information related to current functioning and background information will be collected. Reports from several people are also helpful in establishing a diagnosis: (1) parents report about home functioning, (2) teachers report about school functioning, (3) co-workers report about work functioning, and (4) friends report about social functioning. Typically, the testing battery includes symptom checklists, rating scales to identify emotional and behavioral signs, intelligence testing, and achievement testing.

How common is it?

By definition, ADHD begins in childhood prior to age 12, and according to recent research, it can continue into adulthood. While some children “outgrow” ADHD, evidence suggests that up to 70% can continue to carry symptoms of inattention into adulthood, with hyperactivity typically diminishing with age. According to a 2003 Centers for Disease Control study, 7.8% of children between the ages of 4 and 17 have ever been diagnosed with ADHD. Research indicates that nearly 4% of adults in the U.S. continue to have ADHD.

Is Adult ADHD any different from Childhood ADHD?

Because ADHD is a neurological condition that starts during childhood, symptoms that adults experience are not new, but rather, have continued from childhood. Most adults who have continued symptoms may notice problems with difficulty paying attention to details, organization, talking fast, and difficulties focusing and concentrating. Adults with ADHD do not typically report problems with hyperactivity; either the symptoms have subsided, or they have developed coping strategies for handling their increased activity level. There is no evidence that ADHD develops during adulthood. Concentration problems and distractibility in adults are often due to other problems such as depression, anxiety, stress in relationships, or occupational stress. Any of these and other mental health conditions can mimic the symptoms of ADHD, but they are not ADHD.

Associated problems and consequences that often co-exist with adults who have continued symptoms of ADHD from childhood may include:

- Poor self control
- Easily bored
- Forgetfulness
- Low self-esteem
- Difficulty focusing
- Substance abuse
- Poor time management
- Difficulty regulating emotions, arousal, and motivation
- Relationship problems
- Anxiety/depression
- Poor time perception
- Mood swings
- Variability in work performance
- Employment difficulties
- Chronic lateness
- Risk-taking behaviors

What are my treatment options?

Treatment for ADHD is often “multimodal”—that is, it often involves any combination of education, skills training, behavioral interventions, and medication. Depending on your symptoms and response to these interventions, treatments will vary on a case-by-case basis. As with most illnesses, it is highly recommended to start with the least invasive options first. In treating ADHD, exhaustive attempts at behavioral interventions should initially be pursued before beginning a trial of medication.

Behavioral Interventions

Behavioral Modification, or B-Mod, is typically the type of behavioral intervention that is used in the treatment of ADHD. B-Mod is a process where individuals learn specific skills and techniques designed to alter habits/problem areas and replace them with more adaptive, functional responses. As an adult trying to shape your own behaviors, contingencies (“if...then” scenarios) are helpful in establishing a behavioral plan that encourages a desired behavior attached to a reward (e.g., if I complete X, then I can do Y).

Common guidelines for implementing a B-Mod plan include:

1. Start with goals that are small and attainable
2. Be consistent—regardless of time of day, setting, and situation
3. Follow through with the behavioral intervention over the long haul
4. Remember that learning new skills takes time and is gradual—don’t give up!!

Pharmacological Interventions

Medication is not a cure for ADHD; when effective it reduces ADHD symptoms. Some changes include: academic improvement, increased focus and concentration, increased compliance and effort, and decreased activity level and impulsivity. Medical intervention often involves a trial of methylphenidate, Focalin, Focalin XR, Concerta; Daytrana; Metadate CD; and the amphetamines, Adderall XR and Vyvanse. The effects of these medications are typically felt within 30-60 minutes of taking the medication. Increasing, decreasing, or terminating medication is determined on a case-by-case basis to maximize functioning.

Resources and Suggested Readings

Adults

Kelly & Ramundo (1995). *You mean I’m not lazy, stupid, or crazy: A self-help book for adults with attention deficit disorder.*

Hallowell & Ratey (1995). *Driven to distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder from Childhood Through Adulthood.*

Websites

Children and Adults with Attention-deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder : www.chadd.org

ADHD News: www.adhdnews.com

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Tips

Tips to help Adults identify common problem areas in the workplace or at home.

Distractibility	Strategy
ADHD is marked by an inability to control what one pays attention to and is not always a conscious decision. Problems with external distractibility (noises and movement in the surrounding environment) and internal distractibility (daydreams) can be the biggest challenge for adults with ADHD.	Request a private office or cubicle, take work home or work in the office when others are not present. Use white noise, headphones, music or other sounds to drown out office noise. Route phone calls to voicemail and respond to them at a set time. Jot down ideas in a notebook to avoid interruption in current task. Perform one task at a time. Keep a running list of ideas so that you can communicate them more effectively.
Impulsivity	Strategy
Adults with ADHD may struggle with impulsivity and temper outbursts at home or in the workplace.	Use self-talk to monitor impulsive actions. Ask for regular constructive feedback, to become more aware of how impulsiveness might manifest in you. Practice relaxation and meditation techniques. Identify problems that regularly trigger impulsive reactions and develop routines for coping with these situations.
Hyperactivity	Strategy
Adults with the hyperactivity presentation of ADHD often do better in jobs that allow a great deal of movement, however, if your job is sedentary there are strategies that can be helpful.	Take intermittent breaks to engage in additional tasks (photocopying, going to the mail room or walking to the water fountain. Take note in meetings to prevent restlessness. Move around, exercise, take a walk or run up and down the stairs.
Poor Memory	Strategy
Failing to remember deadlines and other responsibilities can provoke or frustrate coworkers.	Use tape recorder devices or take notes during meetings. Write checklists for complicated tasks. Use a daily planner and keep it with you to keep track of tasks. Use reminders (alarms, bulletin boards, computer check lists) for memory triggers and put reminders in highly visible places.
Boredom-blockouts	Strategy
Due to a strong need of stimulation, Adults with ADHD become easily bored at work.	Set a timer to stay on task. Break up long tasks into shorter ones. Take breaks and walk around. Find a job with stimulating responsibilities and minimal routine tasks.
Time Management Difficulties	Strategy
Managing time can be challenging for adults with ADHD.	Use time-line charts to break large projects into smaller pieces with due dates. Reward yourself after every due date. Use watch devices with alarms, buzzers or planners. Set devices to alert 5 minutes prior to meetings on your calendar. Avoid overscheduling the day by overestimating how long each task or meeting will take.

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Procrastination	Strategy
Putting things off prevents the completion of tasks and creates problems for others on your team.	Break tasks into smaller pieces and reward yourself along the way (walks with your pet, dancing- things you enjoy) Ask for a set deadline for tasks Consider working within a team with someone who manages time well.
Difficulty Managing Long-term Projects	Strategy
Managing complex long-term projects can be difficult as it requires a range of skills including time management, organizing materials, tracking progress and communicating updates.	Shorten time allowed on a project. Break projects into manageable parts and reward yourself after completing each. Work with someone who has good organizational skills. Practice increasing tolerance for working on longer projects gradually.
Paperwork/ details	Strategy
The inability to find important papers, turn in reports and maintain a filing system can present distress.	Make a rule to handle documents only once. Make filing fun by color coding and using catchy labels. Keep papers that are currently in use and discard the rest.
Interpersonal/ Social Skills	Strategy
Individuals with ADHD may unintentionally offend coworkers by frequent interruptions, talking too much, being too blunt or not listening well.	Ask for feedback, especially if there is a history of issues with colleagues and supervisors. Work with a behavioral health provider to pick up on social cues more regularly and determine the types of settings that lead to interpersonal issues. Seek positions with greater autonomy if you find working with others can be challenging.