

ADHD Basics

Attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a developmental and behavioral disorder that affects 3% to 5% of all school-age children. Although the condition usually manifests in childhood, it can persist into adulthood, causing difficulties at home, at school and at work if not recognized and treated. In fact, experts now estimate that ADHD affects 30% to 50% of adults who had ADHD in childhood.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of ADHD include inattention, impulsiveness and hyperactivity that are inappropriate for a person's age level.

Children who have ADHD often:

- Are easily distracted by sights and sounds in their environment
- Are unable to concentrate for long periods of time
- Are restless and impulsive
- Have a tendency to daydream
- Are slow to complete tasks

Adults who have ADHD may have less pronounced symptoms, such as:

- Inattentiveness, impulsivity or hyperactivity
- Impairment in at least two of three areas -- work, life at home and in social interaction with peers
- History of childhood symptoms

Symptoms of ADHD in adults and children vary by individual and range from mild to severe.

What causes ADHD?

The exact cause of ADHD isn't known. Experts do know that there are changes in the brains of people with the condition. It is not caused by home or school situations or by poor parenting. There's a lot of research in the medical community about the potential causes of ADHD.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

There is no single test used to diagnose ADHD. It is diagnosed after a child has shown some or all of symptoms of ADHD on a regular basis for more than 6 months. The diagnosis of ADHD involves the gathering of information from several sources, including school, caregivers and parents. The health care provider will consider how a child's behavior compares with that of other children the same age. The health care provider will also do a physical exam to look for any medical problems that may affect a child's behavior. ADHD in adults is diagnosed using a similar process.

How is ADHD treated?

Although there is no cure for ADHD, treatment can help control symptoms. There are several

types of treatments available.

Stimulants

Stimulant medications (or psych stimulants) have been used to successfully treat ADHD symptoms for many years. Stimulants are used to treat both moderate and severe ADHD in adults and children over age 6.

Stimulants used to treat ADHD include:

- Adderall and Adderall XR
- Concerta
- Cylert
- Dexedrine, Dexedrine Spansules Capsules
- Focalin
- Metadate CD, Metadate ER
- Methylin
- Ritalin, Ritalin LA

Nonstimulant Therapy

In November 2003, the FDA approved Strattera as the first nonstimulant treatment for ADHD. It is the first treatment approved to control ADHD symptoms in children, adolescents and adults.

Antidepressant Therapy

Several types of antidepressant drugs can be used to treat ADHD. Antidepressant therapy for ADHD is sometimes used as the initial treatment in children or adults who also suffer from significant depression. Antidepressants, however, are generally not as effective as stimulants or the newer nonstimulant treatments at improving attention span and concentration. It also may take 2-4 weeks for the full benefits of antidepressants to appear.

Note: In October 2004, The FDA has determined that antidepressant medications increase the risk of suicidal thinking and behavior in children and adolescents with depression and other psychiatric disorders. If you have questions or concerns, discuss them with your health care provider. [Learn more](#)

Other Drugs

Two drugs, Catapres and guanfacine, normally taken to treat high blood pressure, have been shown to be of some benefit for ADHD when used alone or in combination with stimulant drugs. The drugs can improve mental functioning as well as behavior in ADHD.

Behavior Management

Learning behavior management techniques is considered to be an essential part of any successful ADHD treatment program. Most experts agree that combining medication treatments with extended behavior management is the most effective way to manage ADHD in children and adolescents.

In adults with ADHD, experts agree that a combination of medication and socialization training and/or behavior management may help most patients.

Reviewed by the doctors at The Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital.

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