

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services—National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Does your child have trouble paying attention? Does he or she talk nonstop or have trouble staying still? Does your child have a hard time controlling his or her behavior?

For some children, these may be symptoms of **attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder**, or **ADHD**.

What is attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD?

ADHD is a common childhood disorder, and it may affect children differently. It makes it hard for a child to focus and pay attention. Some kids may be hyperactive or have trouble being patient. ADHD can make it hard for a child to do well in school or behave at home.

ADHD can be treated. Doctors and specialists can help.

Who can develop ADHD?

Children of all backgrounds can have ADHD. Teens and adults can have ADHD too.

What causes ADHD?

No one knows for sure. ADHD probably comes from a combination of things. Some possibilities are:

- Genes, because the disorder sometimes runs in families
- Lead in old paint in and plumbing parts
- Smoking and drinking alcohol during pregnancy
- Certain brain injuries
- Food additives like artificial coloring, which might make hyperactivity worse.

Some people think refined sugar causes ADHD. But most research does not support the idea that sugar causes ADHD.

What are the symptoms of ADHD?

ADHD has many symptoms. Some symptoms at first may look like normal behaviors for a child, but ADHD makes them much worse and occur more often. Children with ADHD have at least six symptoms that start in the first five or six years of their lives.

Children with ADHD may:

- Get distracted easily and forget things often
- Switch too quickly from one activity to the next
- Have trouble with directions
- Daydream too much
- Have trouble finishing tasks like homework or chores

- Lose toys, books, and school supplies often
- Fidget and squirm a lot
- Talk nonstop and interrupt people
- Run around a lot
- Touch and play with everything they see
- Be very impatient
- Blurt out inappropriate comments
- Have trouble controlling their emotions.

How do I know if my child has ADHD?

Your child's doctor may make a diagnosis. Or sometimes the doctor may refer you to a mental health specialist who is more experienced with ADHD to make a diagnosis. There is no single test that can tell if your child has ADHD.

It can take months for a doctor or specialist to know if your child has ADHD. He or she needs time to watch your child and check for other problems. The specialist may want to talk to you, your family, your child's teachers, and others.

Sometimes it can be hard to diagnose a child with ADHD because symptoms may look like other problems. For example, a child may seem quiet and well-behaved, but in fact he or she is having a hard time paying attention and is often distracted. Or, a child may act badly in school, but teachers don't realize that the child has ADHD.

If your child is having trouble at school or at home and has been for a long time, ask his or her doctor about ADHD.

How do children with ADHD get better?

Children with ADHD can get better with treatment, but there is no cure. There are three basic types of treatment:

1. **Medication.** Several medications can help. The most common types are called stimulants. Medications help children focus, learn, and stay calm.

Sometimes medications cause side effects, such as sleep problems or stomachaches. Your child may need to try a few medications to see which one works best. It's important that you and your doctor watch your child closely while he or she is taking medicine.

2. **Therapy.** There are different kinds of therapy. Behavioral therapy can help teach children to control their behavior so they can do better at school and at home.
3. **Medication and therapy combined.** Many children do well with both medication and therapy.

How can I help my child?

Give your child guidance and understanding. A specialist can show you how to help your child make positive changes. Supporting your child helps everyone in your family. Also, talk to your child's teachers. Some children with ADHD can get special education services.

How does ADHD affect teens?

Being a teenager isn't always easy. Teens with ADHD can have a tough time. School may be a struggle, and some teens take too many risks or break rules. But like children with ADHD, teens can get better with treatment.

What can I do for my teen with ADHD?

Support your teen. Set clear rules for him or her to follow. Try not to punish your teen every time he or she breaks the rules. Let your teen know you can help.

Can adults have ADHD too?

Many adults have ADHD and don't know they have it. Like ADHD in children and teens, ADHD in adults can make life challenging. ADHD can make it hard for adults to feel organized, stick with a job, or get to work on time. Adults with ADHD may have trouble in relationships. The disorder can also make adults feel restless.

ADHD in adults can be diagnosed and treated. For some adults, finding out they have ADHD can be a big relief. Being able to connect ADHD to longtime problems helps adults understand that they can get better. If you're an adult and think you may have ADHD symptoms, call your doctor.

Contact us to find out more about ADHD.

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