

What is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a group of behavioural symptoms that include inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness. Symptoms of ADHD tend to be noticed at an early age and may become more noticeable when a child's circumstances change, such as when they start school. Most cases are diagnosed when children are 6 to 12 years old. The symptoms of ADHD usually improve with age, but many adults who are diagnosed with the condition at a young age continue to experience problems. People with ADHD may also have additional problems, such as sleep and anxiety disorders.

Symptoms in children and teenagers

The symptoms of ADHD in children and teenagers are well defined, and they're usually noticeable before the age of six. They occur in more than one situation, such as at home and at school. The main signs of each behavioural problem are:

Inattentiveness:

- having a short attention span and being easily distracted
- making careless mistakes – for example, in schoolwork
- appearing forgetful or losing things
- being unable to stick at tasks that are tedious or time-consuming
- appearing to be unable to listen to or carry out instructions
- constantly changing activity or task
- having difficulty organising tasks

Hyperactivity and impulsiveness

- being unable to sit still, especially in calm or quiet surroundings
- constantly fidgeting
- being unable to concentrate on tasks
- excessive physical movement
- excessive talking
- being unable to wait their turn
- acting without thinking
- interrupting conversations
- little or no sense of danger

These symptoms can cause significant problems in a child's life, such as underachievement at school, poor social interaction with other children and adults, and problems with discipline.

Related conditions in children and teenagers

Although not always the case, some children may also have signs of other problems or conditions alongside ADHD, such as:

- **anxiety disorder** – which causes your child to worry and be nervous much of the time; it may also cause physical symptoms, such as a rapid heartbeat, sweating and dizziness
- **oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)** – this is defined by negative and disruptive behaviour, particularly towards authority figures, such as parents and teachers
- **conduct disorder** – this often involves a tendency towards highly antisocial behaviour, such as stealing, fighting, vandalism and harming people or animals
- **depression**
- **sleep problems** – finding it difficult to get to sleep at night, and having irregular sleeping patterns
- **autistic spectrum condition (ASC)** – this affects social interaction, communication, interests and behaviour
- **epilepsy** – a condition that affects the brain and causes repeated fits or seizures
- **Tourette's syndrome** – a condition of the nervous system, characterised by a combination of involuntary noises and movements called tics
- **learning difficulties** – such as dyslexia

What causes ADHD?

The exact cause of ADHD is unknown, but the condition has been shown to run in families. Research has also identified a number of possible differences in the brains of people with ADHD compared to those who don't have the condition. Other factors that have been suggested as potentially having a role in ADHD include:

- being born prematurely (before the 37th week of pregnancy)
- having a low birthweight
- smoking, alcohol or drug abuse during pregnancy

It's thought that around 2% to 5% of school-aged children may have ADHD. ADHD can occur in people of any intellectual ability, although it's more common in people with learning difficulties.

Getting help

Many children go through phases where they're restless or inattentive. This is often completely normal and doesn't necessarily mean they have ADHD. However, you should consider raising your concerns with your child's teacher, their school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) or GP if you think their behaviour may be different to most children their age. It's also a good idea to speak to your GP if you're an adult and you think you may have ADHD, but you weren't diagnosed with the condition as a child.

Diagnosing ADHD

If you think that you or your child may have ADHD, you might want to consider speaking to your GP about it. If you're worried about your child, it may help to speak to their teachers before seeing your GP, to find out if they have any concerns about your child's behaviour. Your GP can't formally diagnose ADHD, but they can discuss your concerns with you and refer you for a specialist assessment, if necessary. When you see your GP, they may ask you:

- about your symptoms or those of your child
- when these symptoms started
- where the symptoms occur – for example, at home or in school
- whether the symptoms affect your or your child's day-to-day life – for example, if they make socialising difficult
- if there have been any recent significant events in your life or your child's, such as a death or divorce in the family
- if there's a family history of ADHD
- about any other problems or symptoms of different health conditions you or your child may have

Next steps

If your GP thinks your child may have ADHD, they may first suggest a period of "watchful waiting" lasting around 10 weeks – to see if your child's symptoms improve, stay the same or get worse. They may also suggest starting a parent training or education programme to teach you ways of helping your . If your child's behaviour doesn't improve, and both you and your GP believe it's seriously affecting their day-to-day life, your GP should refer you and your child to a specialist for a formal assessment, and your symptoms are now causing moderate or severe functional impairment.

Assessment

There are a number of different specialists that you or your child may be referred to for a formal assessment, including:

- a child or adult psychiatrist
- a paediatrician (a specialist in children's health)
- a learning disability specialist, social worker or occupational therapist with expertise in ADHD

Who you're referred to depends on age and what's available in your local area.

There's no simple test to determine whether your child has ADHD, but your specialist can make an accurate diagnosis after a detailed assessment that may include:

- a physical examination, which can help rule out other possible causes for the symptoms
- a series of interviews with you or your child
- interviews or reports from other significant people, such as partners, parents and teachers

The criteria for making a diagnosis of ADHD in children, teenagers and adults are outlined below.

Diagnosis in children and teenagers

Diagnosing ADHD in children depends on a set of strict criteria. To be diagnosed with ADHD, your child must have six or more symptoms of inattentiveness, or six or more symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsiveness. To be diagnosed with ADHD, your child must also have:

- been displaying symptoms continuously for at least six months
- started to show symptoms before the age of 12
- been showing symptoms in at least two different settings – for example, at home and at school, to rule out the possibility that the behaviour is just a reaction to certain teachers or parental control
- symptoms that make their lives considerably more difficult on a social, academic or occupational level
- symptoms that aren't just part of a developmental disorder or difficult phase, and aren't better accounted for by another condition

How ADHD is treated

Although there's no cure for ADHD, it can be managed with appropriate educational support, advice and support for parents and affected children, alongside medication, if necessary.

Living with ADHD

Caring for a child with ADHD can be draining. The impulsive, fearless and chaotic behaviours typical of ADHD can make normal everyday activities exhausting and stressful. Some issues that may arise in day-to-day life include:

- getting your child to sleep at night
- getting ready for school on time
- listening to and carrying out instructions
- being organised
- social occasions
- shopping

Ways to cope

Although it can be difficult at times, it's important to remember that a child with ADHD can't help their behaviour. People with ADHD find it difficult to suppress impulses, which means they don't stop to consider a situation or the consequences before they act. If you're looking after a child with ADHD, you may find the advice below helpful:

Plan the day

Plan the day so your child knows what to expect. Set routines can make a difference to how a child with ADHD copes with everyday life. For example, if your child has to get ready for school, break it down into structured steps, so they know exactly what they need to do.

Set clear boundaries

Make sure everyone knows what behaviour is expected, and reinforce positive behaviour with immediate praise or rewards. Be clear, using enforceable consequences if boundaries are overstepped (such as taking away a privilege) and follow these through consistently.

Be positive

Give specific praise. Instead of saying a general, "Thanks for doing that," you could say, "You washed the dishes really well. Thank you." This will make it clear to your child that you're pleased, and why.

Giving instructions

If you're asking your child to do something, give brief instructions and be specific. Instead of asking, "Can you tidy your bedroom?" say, "Please put your toys into the box,

and put the books back onto the shelf." This makes it clearer what your child needs to do and creates opportunities for praise when they get it right.

Incentive scheme

Set up your own incentive scheme using a points chart or star chart, so good behaviour can earn a privilege. For example, behaving well on a shopping trip will earn your child time on the computer or some sort of game. Involve your child in it and allow them to help decide what the privileges will be. These charts need regular changes or they become boring. Targets should be:

- immediate (for example, daily)
- intermediate (for example, weekly)
- long-term (for example, three-monthly)

Try to focus on just one or two behaviours at a time.

Intervene early

Watch for warning signs. If your child looks like they're becoming frustrated, overstimulated and about to lose self-control, intervene. Distract your child if possible, by taking them away from the situation, which may calm them down.

Social situations

Keep social situations short and sweet. Invite friends to play, but keep playtimes short, so your child doesn't lose self-control. Don't aim to do this when your child is feeling tired or hungry, such as after a day at school.

Exercise

Make sure your child gets lots of physical activity during the day. Walking, skipping and playing sport can help your child wear themselves out and improve their quality of sleep. Make sure they're not doing anything too strenuous or exciting near to bedtime.

Eating

Keep an eye on what your child eats. If your child is hyperactive after eating certain foods, which may contain additives or caffeine, keep a diary of these and discuss them with your GP.

Bedtime

Stick to a routine. Make sure your child goes to bed at the same time each night and gets up at the same time in the morning. Avoid overstimulating activities in the hours before bedtime, such as computer games or watching TV.

Night time

Sleep problems and ADHD can be a vicious circle. ADHD can lead to sleep problems, which in turn can make symptoms worse. Many children with ADHD will repeatedly get

up after being put to bed and have interrupted sleep patterns. Trying a sleep-friendly routine can help your child and make bedtime less of a battleground.

Help at school

Children with ADHD often have problems with their behaviour at school, and the condition can have a negative impact on a child's academic progress. Speak to your child's teachers or their school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) about any extra support your child may need.

Source: NHS - <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx>

Additional information:

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/adhd/>

<https://www.ukadhd.com/support-groups.htm>

<https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/>

Famous people reported to have a diagnosis of ADHD:

- Justin Timberlake - singer and actor
- Jamie Oliver - Chef
- Karina Smirnov - dancer
- Michael Phelps - Olympic swimmer
- Jim Carrey - actor
- Ty Pennington - TV host
- Sir Richard Branson - entrepreneur
- Paris Hilton - socialite
- Michelle Rodriguez - actor
- Solange Knowles - singer and sister to Beyonce
- Ryan Gosling - actor
- Woody Harrelson - actor
- Louis Smith - gymnast
- Channing Tatum - actor
- Henry Winkler - actor
- Adam Levine - singer and actor