

ADHD: What Parents Should Know

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is the name of a group of behaviors found in many children and adults. People with ADHD have trouble paying attention in school, at home or at work. They may be much more active and/or impulsive than what is usual for their age. These behaviors contribute to significant problems in relationships, learning and behavior. For this reason, children with ADHD are sometimes seen as being "difficult" or as having behavior problems.

ADHD is common, affecting 4% to 12% of school-age children. It's more common in boys than in girls. You may be more familiar with the term attention deficit disorder (ADD). This disorder was renamed in 1994 by the American Psychiatric Association (APA).

What are the symptoms of ADHD?

The child with ADHD who is inattentive will have 6 or more of the following symptoms:

- Has difficulty following instructions
- Has difficulty keeping attention on work or play activities at school and at home
- Loses things needed for activities at school and at home
- Appears not to listen
- Doesn't pay close attention to details
- Seems disorganized
- Has trouble with tasks that require planning ahead
- Forgets things
- Is easily distracted

The child with ADHD who is hyperactive/impulsive will have at least 6 of the following symptoms:

- Is fidgety
- Runs or climbs inappropriately
- Can't play quietly
- Blurts out answers
- Interrupts people
- Can't stay in seat
- Talks too much
- Is always on the go
- Has trouble waiting his or her turn

What causes ADHD?

Children with ADHD do not make enough chemicals in key areas in the brain that are responsible for organizing thought. Without enough of these chemicals, the organizing centers of the brain don't work well. This causes the symptoms in children with ADHD. Research shows that ADHD is more common in children who have close relatives with the disorder. Recent research also links smoking and other substance abuse during pregnancy to ADHD.

Things that don't cause ADHD:

- Bad parenting (though a disorganized home life and school environment can make symptoms worse)
- Too much sugar
- Too little sugar
- Aspartame (brand name: Nutrasweet)
- Food additives or colorings
- Food allergies or other allergies
- Lack of vitamins
- Fluorescent lights
- Too much TV
- Video games

What can I do to help my child with ADHD?

A team effort, with parents, teachers and doctors working together, is the best way to help your child. Children with ADHD tend to need more structure and clearer expectations. Some children benefit from counseling or from structured therapy. Families may benefit from talking with a specialist in managing ADHD-related behavior and learning problems. Medicine also helps many children. Talk with your doctor about what treatments he or she recommends.

What medicines are used to treat ADHD?

Some of the medicines for ADHD are methylphenidate (brand name: Ritalin), dextroamphetamine (brand name: Dexedrine), pemoline (brand name: Cylert) and a combination drug called Adderall. These medicines improve attention and concentration, and decrease impulsive and overactive behaviors. Other medicines can also be used to treat ADHD.

What can I do at home to help my child?

Children with ADHD may be difficult to parent. They may have trouble understanding directions. Children with ADHD are usually in a constant state of activity. This can be a challenge to adults. You may need to change your home life a bit to help your child. Here are some things you can do to help:

- **Make a schedule.** Set specific times for waking up, eating, playing, doing homework, doing chores, watching TV or playing video games, and going to bed. Post the schedule where your child will always see it. Explain any changes to the routine in advance.
- **Make simple house rules.** It's important to explain what will happen when the rules are obeyed and when they are broken. Write down the rules and the results of not following them.
- **Make sure your directions are understood.** Get your child's attention and look directly into his or her eyes. Then tell your child in a clear, calm voice specifically what you want. Keep directions simple and short. Ask your child to repeat the directions back to you.
- **Reward good behavior.** Congratulate your child when he or she completes each step of a task.
- **Make sure your child is supervised all the time.** Because they are impulsive, children with ADHD may need more adult supervision than other children their age.
- **Watch your child around his or her friends.** It's sometimes hard for children with ADHD to learn social skills. Reward good play behaviors.
- **Set a homework routine.** Pick a regular place for doing homework, away from distractions such as other people, TV and video games. Break homework time into small parts and have breaks.
- **Focus on effort, not grades.** Reward your child when he or she tries to finish school work, not just for good grades. You can give extra rewards for earning better grades.
- **Talk with your child's teachers.** Find out how your child is doing at school--in class, at playtime, at lunchtime. Ask for daily or weekly progress notes from the teacher.

Will my child outgrow ADHD?

We used to think children would "grow out" of ADHD. We now know that is not true for most children. Children with ADHD often get better as they grow older and learn to adjust to their problems. Hyperactivity usually stops in the late teenage years. But about half of children with ADHD continue to be easily distracted, with mood swings, hot tempers and an inability to complete tasks. Children with loving, supportive parents who work together with school staff, mental health workers and their doctor have the best chance of becoming well-adjusted adults.

Other Organizations

National Mental Health Association

<http://www.nmha.org>

800-969-NMHA (800-969-6642)

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

<http://www.nami.org>

800-950-NAMI (800-950-6264)

American Psychiatric Association

<http://www.psych.org>

888-35-PSYCH (888-357-7924)

National Institute of Mental Health

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

301-443-4513

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry

<http://www.aacap.org>

202-966-7300

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Disorder

<http://www.chadd.org>

800-233-4050

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.