

ADHD in Adults

What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for **Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder**. ADHD is a biological disorder that affects how the brain works. People with ADHD often have trouble paying attention, sitting still, and controlling their behavior. Symptoms start in childhood, and often continue into adulthood.

What are the challenges faced by adults with ADHD? ADHD can look a little different in adults than it does in childhood. Adults with ADHD may struggle with:

- Procrastinating putting things off, not starting or finishing tasks on time
- Hurrying through work, making a lot of mistakes
- Losing or forgetting things frequently
- Poor time management being late, taking long breaks, missing meetings
- Poor organization and planning
- Difficulty staying seated for long periods of time —
 feeling physically restless and tapping fingers or feet
- Saying or doing things without thinking
- Not recognizing hazards or having attention gaps that can increase driving risks
- Interrupting others frequently
- Becoming frustrated or losing their temper easily
- Difficulty solving problems in relationships

Not everyone with ADHD is faced with all these challenges. Also, ADHD may affect some areas of life more than others.

How do I know it's really ADHD? Many adults have symptoms like these from time to time — but if you have ADHD, they are more severe, they happen regularly, and they can cause serious life problems. ADHD can cause you to lose your job, drop out of school or training, or struggle in your relationships. See the diagnosis information on page 2.

"When my son was diagnosed with ADHD, I started to see similar patterns in my own life — problems that might explain why I've struggled so much at work and in my marriage. I asked my doctor if I could be tested for ADHD.



My doctor did an evaluation that showed I do have ADHD. Now I'm getting treatment and learning how to manage my symptoms, and it's made a huge difference. I'm starting a new job, and I'm looking forward to trying the skills I've learned for managing my ADHD. And my wife and I are working to rebuild our relationship — and deal with the problems ADHD caused in the past.

For years I was frustrated and embarrassed — but I couldn't figure out why life was so hard. Now I know what the problem is, and I can do something about it. I'm also setting a good example for my son. That gives me a lot of hope."

- Robert, 35

If I have ADHD, what can I do? The good news is that there are treatments and strategies that can help you manage ADHD. While there is no cure for ADHD, you can manage your symptoms and live a more satisfying, successful life. This handout has information on treatment, management tips, and resources.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

To diagnose ADHD, your healthcare provider will evaluate you. This takes more than just a single conversation. It's important to get the full picture of your symptoms and how they affect your life, plus check for other conditions that sometimes come along with ADHD. The evaluation process often includes these steps:

- Gathering information from several sources. You'll fill out forms and answer interview questions about your symptoms, including what you remember from childhood. The process also often includes talking with someone close to you (spouse/partner, family member, close friend). People with ADHD may not remember or realize key information about their symptoms the people closest to you can provide a fuller picture.
- Comparing your behaviors to standard symptom criteria for ADHD. For each type, your healthcare provider will check to see if you have at least five of the symptoms listed for a particular type of ADHD (see the lists at right). Your healthcare provider will take into account how ADHD symptoms are expressed differently in adults than in children.
- Assessing how your symptoms affect your life.
 With ADHD, your symptoms have a significant negative impact (also called impairment) in at least two areas of your life, such as work, school, family, or romantic relationships. Your healthcare provider might ask to see job evaluations or grade reports, if they help to show the effect ADHD has on work or school.
- Evaluating you for other conditions that may also be affecting your life. ADHD often comes with other conditions and other conditions may mimic ADHD. These include depression, bipolar disorder, thyroid problems, anxiety, substance abuse, or learning disabilities. Checking for other conditions helps your healthcare provider choose the best treatment. Sometimes it's important to treat another problem before treating the ADHD.

Symptoms for diagnosis

Inattentive type:

- Not noticing details, making careless mistakes
- Difficulty paying attention during a task
- Not seeming to listen if someone speaks to you
- Not following through, not finishing tasks
- Difficulty organizing time and activities
- Avoiding or disliking tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Losing things
- · Being easily distracted
- Being forgetful

Hyperactive/impulsive type:

- Feeling restless
- Fidgeting or squirming
- Leaving your chair when you need to stay seated
- Difficulty doing quiet activities
- Feeling like you're "driven by a motor"
- Talking too much or blurting out information
- Having trouble waiting your turn in conversation
- Interrupting or intruding on others

Combined: Symptoms from both types

How is ADHD treated?

ADHD is typically treated and managed through medication, education, counseling, and care coordination.

Medication

Medication doesn't control ADHD on its own, but it helps your brain process information better so you can build new skills for attention and organization. While jumping into medication first — without addressing other issues in your life — can cause problems, medication can be part of an overall solution.

ADHD medications affect **dopamine** or **norepinephrine**, chemicals that help your brain cells communicate with each other. There are three general types:

• Stimulant medications. Stimulant medications are often tried first because they've been shown to be most effective. Examples include amphetamine (such as Adderall or Vyvanse) and methylphenidate (such as Concerta).

Stimulants are "controlled substances" — they're covered by laws regulating medicines that pose a danger for abuse or addiction. Your healthcare provider will check for a history of substance abuse and will monitor the medication for your safety. (Note: It's against the law to share or sell a controlled substance.)

- **Certain antidepressants** that affect norepinephrine. Examples include desipramine (Norpramine), bupropion (Wellbutrin), and venlafaxine (Effexor).
- Other nonstimulant medications. Some examples
 are atomoxetine (Strattera) and guanfacine (Intuniv).
 Guanfacine is a blood pressure medicine that has been
 found to improve ADHD symptoms. Both of these
 medications are FDA approved to treat adult ADHD.

If medication is prescribed, follow these tips:

- **Ask questions**. Make sure you understand what you're taking, why, and how to take it.
- Follow your doctor's directions. Don't take extra doses or stop the medication suddenly without telling your doctor.
- **Don't share your medication.** This is important with any medication, but especially with some ADHD medications, which can pose a danger of misuse.

• Tell your doctor about side effects, which can include nausea, insomnia, anxiety, loss of appetite, blood pressure changes, or a faster heartbeat. If you experience any of these, your doctor may be able to change your medication or dose to reduce them.

Education

Learning to manage symptoms is the key to success when you have ADHD. For education and support, your doctor may refer you to a class or support group — see page 4.

Counseling

Your doctor might refer you to a **behavioral health specialist** to help you improve your skills. The specialist can also help you and your loved ones resolve issues that may have come up as a result of ADHD symptoms. (Check your insurance plan about coverage.)

Care coordination

Many primary care clinics have a Care Manager or Health Advocate to help coordinate your care between your primary healthcare provider, specialists, and other resources (such as classes or support groups). This person can help make everything go more smoothly, and you'll have a better result no matter what health problems you're managing (including ADHD).



"I was about to flunk two courses because I was always late for tests and I couldn't remember things. I took some Internet quizzes and they said I had ADHD. A friend in my study group has ADHD and she takes pills that help her focus. So I went to the doctor.

The doctor said that I would need a full evaluation — an Internet quiz wasn't enough. At first I was irritated that he wouldn't just write me a prescription — and that he wanted to talk with my parents and my girlfriend. He also wanted grade reports and I had to fill out forms.

Now I'm glad the doctor was careful. He got some good info from my parents. He also saw that I have some other problems that need treatment, in addition to ADHD. And he helped my girlfriend understand that the way I act sometimes — like interrupting her a lot — is partly caused by my ADHD.

I do take medicine for ADHD, but now I understand that's just part of the picture. I'm learning a lot of tricks for working around my symptoms. The schedule app on my phone is my best friend now! School is going better, and I'm excited about the future."

— Collin, 21

Tools and techniques to manage ADHD Get a day planner.

- Choose a planner that covers everything you need to organize. Whether it's paper-based or a phone app, make sure it has a calendar, to-do lists, and a place for reference info (phone numbers, etc.).
- As you start using a planner, take it in steps. Add all your address book information. Next, try the calendar every day for a while. Then add to-do lists.
- Have a daily planning session with yourself. See what's coming up that day and decide which tasks are most important on your to-do list.
- Check the planner often. Carry your planner everywhere. You may need to remind yourself to check or use it — or ask someone to remind you.

Organize your space.

An organized office or home can help you avoid distractions and the overwhelmed feelings that a cluttered space can create. Follow these tips:

- Ask someone to work with you during the initial clean-out. Having a partner can make the task easier.
- **Organize one area at a time.** Divide each room into small sections. Work on the easiest section first.
- Deal with items one at a time. Decide whether each item belongs where it is, somewhere else, or you're not sure. If you're not sure, put the item in a box and store it away for a few weeks.

- Work in short sessions. Tackle just one area in each session. After a half hour to an hour, stop for the day and reward yourself.
- Work on organizing regularly. Be patient with yourself, but be persistent. Remember to reward yourself along the way.

At work, use tricks that help you focus.

- Look for a job that's active, if possible. Many people with ADHD enjoy work that is physically active. If you have a desk job and it's possible to move into a more active job, consider this change.
- **Divide each task into small steps.** Cross each one off as you finish it.
- Divide your work into short sessions 30 minutes or so each time. During each session, avoid all distractions and focus on one task. After 25 to 30 minutes, take a short break to move around. Then dive in again.

In your relationships, educate and listen.

- Help others understand your ADHD. While ADHD isn't a sore throat, it can be "contagious" in the way it affects everyone in a relationship. Explain how ADHD affects you. Discuss how it might affect the relationship.
- Listen to feedback, especially in conflict situations. Stop, take a breath, and ask others what they think.
- Check in with your support system frequently. When you face problems or difficult decisions, the people who love you can provide good advice.

Resources

Organizations

- CHADD (Children and Adults with ADHD) www.chadd.org
- The National Resource Center on ADHD www.help4adhd.org

Books

- Driven to Distraction: Recognizing and Coping with Attention Deficit Disorder. Edward Hallowell and John Ratey. Touchstone 2011.
- More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD. Ari Tuckman. Specialty Press/ A.D.D. Warehouse 2009.
- Taking Charge of Adult ADHD. Russell Barkley. Guilford Press 2010.