

ADHD in Adults

What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for **attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder**. ADHD is a biological disorder that affects how the brain works. While there is no cure for ADHD, there are treatments and strategies for managing your symptoms to live a more satisfying, successful life.

People with ADHD often have trouble paying attention, sitting still, and controlling their impulsive behavior. Symptoms start in childhood and often continue into adulthood. ADHD may affect some areas of life more than others. If left untreated, ADHD can cause you to lose your job, drop out of school or training, or have relationship problems.

What are adult ADHD symptoms?

ADHD can look a little different in adults than it does in childhood and can look different from one person to the next. While not everyone faces these challenges, adults with ADHD often struggle with:

- Putting things off and not starting or finishing tasks on time
- Avoiding or disliking tasks that require more thinking
- Hurrying through work, making careless mistakes, and not noticing details
- Losing or forgetting things frequently
- Being late, taking long breaks, and missing meetings
- Not being able to plan and organize tasks and activities
- Staying seated for long periods of time or feeling physically restless and tapping fingers or feet
- Saying or doing things without thinking



What do I need to do next?

- 1 Consider taking a class or joining a support group (see page 3 for resources).
- 2 Find out if your insurance will cover ADHD counseling.
- 3 Make a plan for managing your ADHD (see page 4).
- 4 Talk to your healthcare provider about whether or not you should try an ADHD medication to help manage your symptoms.

- Not recognizing hazards, or having attention gaps that can increase driving risks
- Talking too much, interrupting others frequently, or not listening when someone speaks to them
- Becoming frustrated or losing their temper easily
- Difficulty solving problems in relationships

Many adults have symptoms like these from time-to-time, but if you have ADHD, they are more severe or happen regularly.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

To diagnose ADHD, your healthcare provider will need to get the full picture of your symptoms and how they affect your life. They will need to check for other conditions that sometimes occur along with ADHD. This process typically involves:

- Filling out forms and answering interview questions about your symptoms, including what you remember from childhood.
- Talking with someone close to you (such as a spouse or partner, family member, or close friend) to learn key information about your symptoms that you may not be aware of.
- Checking to see if you have at least 5 of the symptoms listed for some form of ADHD.
- Determining if your ADHD symptoms have a significant negative impact (also called **impairment**) in at least 2 areas of your life — work, school, family, or relationships. Your healthcare provider might ask to see job evaluations or grade reports, to show how ADHD impacts you at work or school.
- Checking for other conditions that have similar symptoms, such as depression, bipolar disorder, thyroid problems, anxiety, substance use disorder, or learning disabilities. It's important to diagnose and treat other problems before treating ADHD.

Note: Some healthcare providers are not comfortable with diagnosing ADHD. They may recommend their patient see a mental health provider for a more detailed psychiatric assessment before starting any medication.

How is ADHD treated?

ADHD is often treated and managed with medications, education, counseling, and care coordination.

Medications

Medications alone don't completely control ADHD, but they can be part of an overall solution. ADHD medications can help your brain process information better so you can build new attention and organization skills. ADHD medications affect **dopamine** [DOH-puh-meem] or **norepinephrine** [nawr-ep-uh-NEF-rin], chemicals that help your brain cells communicate with each other.

Questions for my healthcare provider about my ADHD medication

1 What am I taking and why?

2 When am I supposed to take it?

3 Can I stop taking it at any time?

4 Should I take more if I don't think it's working?

There are 3 types of ADHD medications:

- 1 Stimulant medications** are often tried first because they're most effective. Examples include **amphetamines** [am-FET-uh-means] (such as Adderall or Vyvanse) and **methylphenidate** [meth-uhl-FEN-i-deyt] (such as Ritalin or Concerta). Stimulants also pose a potential danger for abuse or addiction. They are "controlled substances" and are covered by special laws. 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.)**
- 2 Antidepressants** that affect a certain brain chemical, norepinephrine, such as desipramine (Norpramin), bupropion (Wellbutrin), and venlafaxine (Effexor).
- 3 Other non-stimulant medications** such as atomoxetine (Strattera) and guanfacine (Intuniv). Guanfacine is a blood pressure medication that has been found to improve ADHD symptoms. Both of these medications are approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat adult ADHD.

For all ADHD medications, be sure to:

- Follow your healthcare provider's directions.
- Not share your medication with anyone.
- Talk to your provider about how to manage any side effects (such as nausea, insomnia, anxiety, changes in blood pressure, a faster heartbeat, or loss of appetite).

Education

Learning to manage symptoms is the key to success when you have ADHD. For education and support, your healthcare provider may refer you to a class or support group, such as those sponsored by:

- Children and Adults with ADHD (CHADD): www.chadd.org
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) of Utah: www.namiut.org

Counseling

Your healthcare provider 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 your ADHD symptoms. (Make sure to find out if your insurance plan will cover counseling.)

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).

Resources

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.

My plan for managing 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 information (such as phone numbers).
- **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 30 to 60 minutes, 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 an active job,** if possible. Many people with ADHD enjoy physically active work. 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.

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