

UNDERSTANDING ADHD

Information for Parents about Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

Kids are kids. Sometimes, they misbehave – they run around and crash into things, they talk nonstop, or they are just plain impatient. Other times, they daydream, don't pay attention, or don't finish what they start. For children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), these behaviors are more than occasional. It can be hard for children with ADHD to live normal lives because these behaviors are so frequent and severe. Children with ADHD can have trouble getting along with their siblings and other children - at school and at play. Difficulty paying attention results in trouble learning, leading to problems in school. Impulsive behavior may even lead a child to put himself or herself in danger. ADHD is a serious condition. The good news is that it can be treated effectively. Your child's pediatrician can offer treatment alternatives. As a parent, it is critical that you are involved in this treatment.

WHAT IS ADHD?

First, let's talk about what ADHD is NOT.

- It is not something to be ashamed of
- It does not mean your child is "bad"
- It is not caused by poor parenting

ADHD is a very common chronic condition. It affects about 5% of school-aged children – many of whom continue to have the condition as adults. ADHD affects more boys than girls - almost 3 times as many. ADHD is a brain condition. For example, certain parts of the brain responsible for self-control and organizing information do not function adequately in children with ADHD. Because of this, it is considered a "biologically-based" disorder. ADHD also appears to run in families. Sometimes, a parent is diagnosed at the same time as a child. There is no evidence that ADHD is caused by eating too much sugar, allergies, or food additives.



Health New England *How Can We Help?*SM

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HOW DO I KNOW IF MY CHILD HAS ADHD?

Remember, most children show these types of behaviors from time to time. Just because you notice your child forgetting things, not paying attention, or fighting with siblings and peers more often, does not mean your child has ADHD. These behaviors could be caused by stress – from school or friends, for example. It does not necessarily mean he or she has ADHD. Often, ADHD is first noticed when a child goes to school. A teacher may notice the symptoms and notify the parent(s). The child's pediatrician also may assess ADHD symptoms at the child's annual physical exam.

However, you don't have to wait for someone else to say something. If your child is 6 years of age or older and has shown symptoms of ADHD for more than 6 months, talk to his or her pediatrician.

GETTING A DIAGNOSIS OF ADHD

There is no single test for ADHD. Diagnosing ADHD takes several steps. It involves gathering information from many sources. You, your child, and your child's school/teacher should all be involved in assessing your child's behavior. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed guidelines to diagnose ADHD which include the use of standardized questionnaires for parents and teachers. The questionnaires will help determine the scope and severity of the symptoms associated with ADHD. The pediatrician also will assess if the behaviors interfere with your child's ability to function – at school, in social situations, in recreational activities, and at home. The pediatrician will also conduct a complete physical examination. This is to see if your child's behaviors are secondary to any other medical or psychiatric condition. If the doctor has concerns about other conditions, he may refer your child to a specialist.

These conditions may include:

- Developmental disabilities
- Difficulty hearing or seeing
- Severe aggression and/or violence
- Speech or language problems
- Depression or anxiety

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ADHD?

Children with ADHD may show one or more of these behavior symptoms:

ADHD SYMPTOMS	
Symptom	Behaviors
Inattention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty paying attention • Easily distracted • Disorganized • Careless • Forgetful
Hyperactivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is in constant motion • Cannot stay seated • Talks too much • Cannot play quietly • Fidgets • Squirms
Impulsivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts and speaks without thinking • Has trouble taking turns • Cannot wait for things • Interrupts others

There are several subtypes of ADHD.

INATTENTIVE only: Children with this type of ADHD are not overly active or disruptive. As a result, their symptoms are easy to miss. This type of ADHD is more common in girls.

HYPERACTIVE/IMPULSIVE: Children with this type of ADHD show hyperactive and impulsive behavior, but are able to pay attention.

COMBINED INATTENTIVE/HYPERACTIVE/IMPULSIVE: Children with this type of ADHD show all three symptoms. This is the most common type of ADHD.

TREATMENT FOR ADHD

If the doctor confirms the diagnosis of ADHD, he or she will recommend a course of treatment. For children diagnosed with ADHD, the prognosis is very encouraging. There is no cure for ADHD, but it can be treated successfully. Many treatment options are available. The treatment the doctor recommends will be tailored to your child's needs. In most cases, however, it is likely the treatment will include:

- Education about ADHD for you and your child.
- Monitoring of behavior in different situations.
- Medication.
- Individual and family therapy.
- Parent education/training.
- Long-term behavior management planning

MEDICATION

Many parents are concerned about having their child on medication. This is understandable. However, stimulant medications are proven as a safe and effective way to treat ADHD symptoms. These prescription medications work by stimulating the brain in the areas that calm and focus a child/person. They can help your child to focus better and ignore distractions. As a result, your child will be more likely to succeed in school and at other activities. Different types of stimulants are available. There are short-acting, intermediate-acting, and long-acting forms. Your child's pediatrician will determine the most appropriate type of stimulant to meet your child's particular needs. Be sure you talk with the doctor about any concerns you may have. Remember, it may take a while to find the right medication and the right dosage for your child. As your child grows, the dosage will be adjusted. When your child takes the medication each day may change over time, too.

HELPING YOUR CHILD COPE WITH ADHD

It's not easy having ADHD. Here are some things you can do to help your child.

- **Daily Schedule**
Be sure to have a consistent daily routine for your child. Have similar times each day for waking up, eating meals, going to sleep, etc.
- **Reduce Distractions**
Loud music, electronic games, and television can be distracting. Reduce the amount of time your child is exposed to these. Also, limit the time he or she spends at places that are very stimulating – like malls, arcades, and theme parks.
- **Reduce Clutter**
Keep your house as organized as possible. Help your child do the same with his or her room. Have sensible places for toys, books, and clothes.
- **Reward Positive Behavior**
Give your child a hug, a “high five”, or small prizes when he or she shows positive behavior.
- **Use Calm and Firm Discipline**
Use immediate and consistent consequences, such as time-out or removing the child from the situation. Loud yelling and physical punishment are not helpful.

It's not easy being the parent of a child with ADHD. Be sure to take care of yourself. Learn stress management techniques. This can help you to respond calmly to your child, even in the most difficult situations.

If necessary, seek therapy for support. Your pediatrician can help you find parent support or education groups or other community resources.

It's also important to remember that it's not easy being a child with ADHD. Children with ADHD often experience frustration, failure, and frequent criticism. Keeping this in mind may help you to empathize with your child. Remember that a positive parental relationship with your child is a critical foundation for learning and development.

RESOURCES AND MORE INFORMATION

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI)

www.nami.org
(800) 950-NAMI (6264)

Self-help, support, and advocacy organization of consumers, families, and friends of people with severe mental illness.

National Attention Deficit Disorder Association

www.add.org
Dedicated to providing information, resources and networking opportunities to adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the professionals who serve them

Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD)

www.chadd.org
An organization providing education, advocacy and support for individuals with ADHD.