

# Attention Deficit–Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention deficit–hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is common, affecting up to 12% of school-aged children. Children with ADHD have difficulty paying attention and controlling their behavior, leading to problems at home and school. Medications and other treatments can help to lessen these problems.

## What is ADHD?

ADHD is a behavioral disorder consisting of difficulty paying attention and controlling impulses and being overactive. The result is problems with school work, trouble getting along with friends and family, and low self-esteem. Children with ADHD may have other emotional, behavioral, language, and learning disorders.

## What does it look like?

Children with ADHD have problems in three key areas:

- *Inattention.* They may be easily distracted and have trouble paying attention. They may lose or forget things, or they may not seem to listen or follow instructions.
- *Impulsivity.* Children with ADHD may have trouble controlling themselves. They may interrupt others frequently or have trouble waiting their turn.
- *Hyperactivity.* They are overactive and have trouble sitting still or being quiet. They may leave their seats in the classroom or talk too much.

Your child's main problem may be hyperactivity or inattention or a combination of these. The inattentive behavior seems more commonly found in older children and in girls.

Other characteristics of ADHD are:

- Symptoms occur before age 7.
- Symptoms occur at home and school and other places.

Your doctor may have you and your child's teacher fill out questionnaires (such as the Conner's scale) to aid in making the diagnosis of ADHD.

## What causes ADHD?

There is no single, known cause of ADHD. Both inherited and environmental factors probably contribute.

- ADHD may occur from injury to the brain caused by head trauma, premature birth, lead poisoning, and other risks.

- High stress or parenting difficulties may contribute to your child's problems but do not cause ADHD.

## What puts your child at risk for ADHD?

- Male sex—ADHD is diagnosed three to four times more often in boys.
- Having an affected sibling.
- Other behavioral or mental health problems, including conduct disorder, anxiety, depression, and learning disorders.

## Can ADHD be prevented?

There is no known way to prevent ADHD. Getting treatment and learning how to live with ADHD may lessen its impact.

## What are some other problems associated with ADHD?

- Many children with ADHD have continued symptoms through adolescence and into adulthood. Attention problems become more of an issue in older children, leading to health and social problems.
- Without treatment, ADHD may increase your child's risk of experiencing later problems such as injuries, disappointments at school and work, and risky behaviors.
- Taking medications for ADHD does *not* lead to addiction. In fact, children who receive medication may be less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol.

## How is ADHD treated?

*Psychosocial treatments.* Learning about ADHD's many effects on your child's behavior, school life, and family life is the first step in treatment. Sometimes this means finding ways of adjusting the home and school environments to better meet your child's needs. Key goals include:

- Improving relationships with family, teachers, friends, and classmates.
- Reducing behaviors that cause problems while increasing your child's ability to do necessary tasks at home and school.
- Working to improve your child's self-esteem.

*Behavior management.* Training in behavior management is an important part of getting your child's ADHD

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symptoms under control. It also helps address problems with relationships and self-esteem.

- One of the keys is parental consistency, that is, making sure your child knows the consequences of his or her actions, both positive and negative. Both parents should respond to situations in the same way.
- Your child should receive rewards for good behavior (positive reinforcement) and face consequences for not meeting behavior goals (negative reinforcement).
- We may recommend a visit to a mental health provider if your child has more severe ADHD or associated conditions such as depression or anxiety.
- Other forms of therapy may help with other behavior or mental health problems, such as depression or anxiety.

*School interventions.* Some simple changes in school routines are helpful to children with ADHD:

- Having your child sit at the front of the class may limit distractions while increasing supervision.
- Ask your child's teacher to repeat instructions, if possible.

*Medications.* Stimulants and other types of medications can help in treating ADHD. Medications for ADHD do not change your child's personality or cause addiction. In most cases, proper medications help to reduce the behaviors that cause problems for your child.

- Children respond differently to the various medications used to treat ADHD. It may take a few tries to find the best medication for your child.
- Stimulants are the most commonly used type of medication. They reduce major ADHD symptoms in about 80% of children.

- Side effects are usually mild and don't last very long. When they occur, we may lower the dose or try a different drug. Common side effects include:
  - Loss of appetite.
  - Weight loss.
  - Trouble sleeping.
  - Although uncommon, tics may develop. (Tics are repetitive body motions, such as eye blinking or making certain sounds.)
- Other types of drugs may also be helpful. For example, antidepressants may be useful if your child has depression along with ADHD.
- A relatively new, nonstimulant drug called Strattera (generic name: atomoxetine) may be recommended. It has fewer side effects than stimulants but may be less effective.
- Your child will be followed up at regular intervals to check for side effects and monitor the effectiveness of treatment.
- *Developmental testing.* Because some children with ADHD have associated learning disabilities, your doctor may suggest developmental testing.



### When should I call your office?

Your child should be seen on a regular basis to check for side effects and monitor improvement in ADHD symptoms. Between appointments, call our office if:

- Your child's ADHD symptoms get worse or don't get better with treatment.
- Your child develops new symptoms, including possible drug side effects.