

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Mar 05, 2021

ADHD: what is it?

Caring for a child who has ADHD can put a strain on you and your family. ADHD can cause problems at home and at school. If your child has ADHD it's important to get a proper diagnosis. There are treatments that can help.

You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide what treatments are best for your child.

What happens in ADHD?

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Children with ADHD find it hard to concentrate, are overactive, and act without thinking.

All children can be difficult at times. But that doesn't mean that they have ADHD. Children with ADHD behave in a way that can cause serious difficulties at home and at school, most of the time. This is not because they're being naughty - ADHD is a medical condition.

Doctors think that children with ADHD have brains that work differently from the brains of other children.

Everyone's brain uses chemicals called neurotransmitters to carry messages between brain cells. Children with ADHD may have less of two types of neurotransmitters: dopamine and noradrenaline.

These chemicals affect how we deal with information from the world around us.

A child with ADHD is unable to process information in the same way as other children. If a child has ADHD:

- the outside world rushes in with a flood of noise and images
- they cannot decide what's important and get confused
- they find it difficult to organise daily tasks and to concentrate on just one activity.

ADHD is nobody's fault. Nothing you or your child has done has caused it. Too much television, too much sugar, or poor schools do not cause ADHD. Nobody knows exactly what causes ADHD. It is probably caused by a combination of things.

ADHD: what is it?

You might hear ADHD called different names. Doctors used to call it attention deficit disorder or hyperactivity. Now most doctors use the name ADHD.

But some doctors still use the old names. You may also hear ADHD called hyperkinetic disorder, or HKD for short.

How can I tell if my child has ADHD?

The main symptoms of ADHD are struggling to pay attention, being overactive, and being impulsive. Here are some examples of these types of behaviour.

Being inattentive

Inattentive children are easily distracted, drift from one activity to another, and get bored quickly. They may not seem to listen when you speak to them, and find it very hard to concentrate.

Homework will probably be a struggle and they might seem messy and forgetful.

Being hyperactive

Hyperactive children find it almost impossible to stay still. They will squirm in their seat, fidget, and get up all the time. They never seem to run out of energy. They run about and chatter constantly.

As children get older, they will be less like this. But even adults with ADHD get restless.

Being impulsive

Impulsive children don't stop to think before they act. They might seem very impatient and constantly interrupt when others are speaking.

They often get into trouble at school for talking when it's not their turn, messing around, and touching things they are not supposed to. They may be accident prone, knock things over, or do dangerous things, such as running across roads.

Some children with ADHD have all of these symptoms, while others are either mostly inattentive or mostly hyperactive and impulsive.

If you are worried that your child acts like this most of the time, talk to your doctor or your child's teacher. They can arrange to have your child assessed by a specialist, usually a child psychiatrist or psychologist.

Unfortunately, there is likely to be a waiting list, so this may take a while. It may help to keep a diary of your child's behaviour, to show to the doctor or specialist.

How do doctors diagnose ADHD?

There is no scan or test that can tell if a child has ADHD.

ADHD: what is it?

Doctors are very careful about making a diagnosis of ADHD. A wrong diagnosis can be harmful, because the child might have treatment they don't need. So diagnosing ADHD takes some time. The specialist will check to see if your child fits the criteria of a child with ADHD. This means that:

- your child must have six or more symptoms of not paying attention, or six or more symptoms of being overactive and acting before thinking
- these symptoms must have started before your child was 7 years old
- your child must have been behaving like this for at least six months
- your child's behaviour must be causing problems in at least two places, such as at home and at school.

The specialist might ask you and your child's teacher to fill out forms about the way your child behaves. He or she will also talk to your child.

Your child might need tests to make sure his or her behaviour is not being caused by anything else, such as hearing problems, epilepsy, or learning difficulties. Only when the specialist is certain will your child be diagnosed as having ADHD.

What will happen to my child?

Life can be difficult for children with ADHD. They are often in trouble at school and find it difficult to make friends. But a child's outlook can improve dramatically with the right treatment and support.

The usual treatment for ADHD is a combination of medicine and therapy. Many children with ADHD go on to lead normal lives.

Experts used to think that children grew out of ADHD when they were teenagers. And about one-third of children do. But the other two-thirds still need treatment as teenagers.

And many adults will still have some difficulty with concentrating, controlling their behaviour, and having relationships. But many adults with ADHD learn to adapt to these issues.

Working with your child's school

Children with ADHD often fall behind with their school work, and their behaviour can cause problems for teachers. It's important to keep in touch with your child's school so that you can work together so that your child gets the most out of school.

Your child's school might decide that your child needs some extra help in the classroom. For example, it might:

- have a Special Education Co-ordinator to give children with ADHD extra help
- make special seating areas where your child can work in an area with few distractions but space to move around
- give your child extra breaks, or extra learning equipment, such as computers
- break down instructions into manageable steps.

You can ask your child's teacher or head teacher for more information about how to help your child. Or you could contact your local education authority, the part of your local council responsible for education.

Ways for children to help themselves

As children with ADHD get older they might be able to learn ways to help themselves. These are some of the things you may want to suggest.

- If they can't remember an instruction at school they should feel able to ask the teacher to repeat it. They shouldn't guess.
- They can break big jobs into smaller stages and reward themselves as they finish each one.
- They can make a list of what they need to do each day. Then they can cross each thing off the list as they do it.
- They should do their homework somewhere quiet.
- They ought to do one thing at a time.
- They should try to take regular, short breaks.
- They can carry a notebook and write down things that they need to remember.
- They can use Post-it notes to remind themselves of things they need to do.

Where to get more help

There are various charities and support groups that offer support to parents of children with ADHD (and often to adults with ADHD). For example, in the UK, The National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service (ADDISS; addiss.co.uk) provides advice and support to families coping with ADHD.

Your doctor might be able to direct you to a similar service in your area. Or you can search online.

To find out more about treatments for ADHD, see our leaflet *ADHD: what treatments work?*

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