

Adult ADHD: Information and Treatment Choices



Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a condition commonly found in children, but it can also be present in adults. People with ADHD may either experience attention problems or hyperactive and impulsive behavior problems, or both. Attention problems include trouble concentrating, listening and completing tasks. Hyperactive behavior problems involve restlessness and a tendency to talk a lot, often quickly and loudly. Impulsive behavior is acting without thinking and having difficulty waiting for anything.

While many children outgrow ADHD or learn to manage it as they mature, roughly half of those diagnosed with it will continue to experience this disorder into adulthood. Today, about 4 percent of the adult population in the United States is known to suffer from ADHD, with many more individuals undiagnosed.

What are the symptoms?

In order for an ADHD diagnosis to be made, symptoms must be present and must cause problems in two or more settings, such as at work, home, and in social situations. Symptoms of ADHD include:

- *Lack of focus:* Not listening, daydreaming
- *Disorganization:* Paying bills late, misplacing items, keeping a messy desk
- *Forgetfulness:* Missing appointments, forgetting to return calls
- *Restlessness/nervousness:* Fidgeting, biting fingernails, twirling hair, pacing
- *Impatience:* Needing immediate gratification, low tolerance before becoming frustrated

- *Spontaneous urges:* Speaking impulsively without thinking, running up credit card debt.

People with ADHD may change jobs frequently or have a history of unemployment; make impulsive decisions related to money, travel, or social plans; partake in risky behaviors, possibly leading to more driving accidents; and have difficulty keeping relationships with partners, children, and friends.

What causes ADHD?

Research shows that ADHD is a neurological disorder caused by one or more of the following factors:

- *Brain function:* The part of the brain that is responsible for focus and attention over long periods of time may not be working properly.
- *Brain chemistry:* There may be an imbalance of neurotransmitters (chemicals in the brain that allow brain cells to talk to each other).
- *Brain injury during pregnancy and childbirth:* Exposure to infections or toxins during pregnancy, minor physical injuries to the developing fetus, and birth complications—such as not getting enough oxygen—may increase the chances of ADHD.
- *Genetics:* A child of an adult with ADHD has about a 25 percent chance of having ADHD. A family history of alcoholism and mood disorders seems to be related to an increased risk for ADHD.



Treatment options

Proper treatment can help with controlling symptoms of ADHD, increasing feelings of self-esteem and improving quality of life. Current treatment options include medications, therapy, education and self-care. The kind of treatment chosen for you will depend on your preferences, the severity of symptoms, and whether you have any other conditions, such as depression, anxiety, or substance abuse.

Medications

In addition to relieving most or all of the symptoms of ADHD, medications can make other treatments, such as therapy, more effective. Common medications used to treat ADHD include stimulants and antidepressants. Most studies indicate that stimulants have the best results for managing symptoms of ADHD. For people who have other conditions such as depression and low self-esteem, antidepressants are often prescribed. Both stimulants and antidepressants must be prescribed and monitored by a licensed health care professional. Your doctor may try different medications and dosage levels to determine the most effective course of treatment.

Side effects of ADHD medications are usually mild and easily manageable. They may include:

- Lack of appetite
- Lack of sleep or interrupted sleep
- Racing heart
- Increased blood pressure
- Mild headache or upset stomach

The majority of people with ADHD respond well to medications. It is important to take your medications as prescribed. This will increase your chances for successful treatment. If you experience

side effects or have concerns about your medication at any time, consult your physician immediately.

Therapy and education

Understanding the problem is an important part of dealing with ADHD. Learning new skills through therapy and education can help improve relationships, attention, memory, time management, stress reduction, and overall self-esteem. Some people feel they need therapy for help with problems other than ADHD. If this is the case, your health care professional may recommend that you attend additional therapy groups, workshops, or classes.

Self-care tips

Self care is an important component of ADHD treatment that can enhance the effects of medication, therapy, and education. Try the following tips and see if they offer relief from ADHD symptoms:

Practice time management

Learning skills to stay organized will help focus your attention on one task at a time. Try writing down and prioritizing everything that you have to do in a given day. Check items off the list as you complete them. Even if you don't make it through the whole list, congratulate yourself for the tasks that you do accomplish.

Reduce stress

Regular practice of relaxation techniques can help relieve stress, which can lead to better concentration and less impulsiveness. Any of the following can help:

- Deep breathing
- Progressive muscle relaxation
- Yoga
- Guided imagery
- Meditation

If you're not familiar with any of these techniques, you can get more information at your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department.

Learn positive self talk

Repeating encouraging phrases to yourself can help you calm down and keep you from getting angry or frustrated. The phrase "easy does it" is an example of a powerful tool that many people have found to be helpful when dealing with difficult circumstances. Self talk becomes more useful when you create your own phrases and use them to guide you through difficult situations. These key phrases can be memorized and then used to guide your efforts when you face a challenge.

Other resources

- Attention Deficit Disorder Association: add.org/
- Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD): chadd.org
- National Institute of Mental Health: nimh.nih.gov
- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.