

Understanding the Child With ADHD

Information for Parents About Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder



Children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, can be a real challenge for their parents, teachers, pediatricians, and themselves. These children have trouble controlling their behavior and are at risk of doing poorly at school. The American Academy of Pediatrics has designed this brochure to help parents of children with ADHD by answering some of the more common questions they may have about ADHD including: What is ADHD? What are the symptoms and causes? How is it treated?

What is ADHD?

ADHD is not a learning disability, but a behavioral problem. Children with ADHD are overactive, impulsive, and have trouble paying attention for more than a few minutes. ADHD affects 3% to 5% of all school-age children and is more common in boys. ADHD is very stressful for the child as well as the entire family. Children with ADHD often know their behavior is disruptive but they cannot seem to do anything about it. Parents need to understand this and give their children love and support. Parents also need to work with their child's pediatrician, teachers, and counselors to learn how to cope with ADHD.

Signs of ADHD

ADHD can be very hard to diagnose since it shares many of the same symptoms as other disorders. Symptoms of ADHD usually start before a child reaches 7 years of age and it is important to rule out any other medical or emotional problems.

Children with ADHD have trouble paying attention, are impulsive, and usually very active. Some children, however, are inattentive and impulsive but not hyperactive. All children act this way once in a while but children with ADHD act this way most of the time. The following list may help you determine if your child has symptoms of ADHD. If your child has a significant number of these symptoms and these symptoms have lasted for 6 months or longer, discuss your observations with your pediatrician.



Children 3 to 5 Years of Age:

- are constantly in motion
- find it hard to sit still at mealtimes
- play only briefly with toys, and flit from one activity to another
- have difficulty responding to simple commands
- play in a way that seems noisier than that of other children
- talk nonstop and often interrupt others
- have trouble sharing, waiting, and taking turns; often take things away from others with little regard for their feelings
- misbehave regularly
- have trouble keeping friends
- are described by teacher as “hard to handle” or “behavior problem”

Children 6 to 12 Years of Age:

- often get into dangerous activities without thinking about what will happen
- fidget and squirm restlessly in seat and often wander around the classroom
- are easily distracted and don't finish assignments or chores
- have trouble following through on instructions
- play in an overly aggressive manner
- talk at inappropriate times and often blurt out answers to questions
- have difficulty waiting in lines or taking turns in games or group situations
- are disorganized and often lose things; make careless mistakes at school and home
- have inconsistent school performance
- are socially immature, with few friends and have a poor reputation among peers
- have been labeled by teachers as “unmotivated,” “lazy,” “a daydreamer,” or a “behavior problem”

What causes ADHD?

The causes of ADHD are not clearly understood. Some studies suggest the following:

- Children with ADHD have problems with the chemicals that send messages in the brain.
- If one or both parents have ADHD, their children may show symptoms of it as well.
- Exposure to toxins may cause ADHD.
- ADHD may be seen after childhood illnesses.
- Developmental problems may be associated with ADHD.
- ADHD may be caused by brain injury.

Diagnosis and identification of ADHD

Many children have moments when they seem “hyperactive,” but real hyperactivity affects only about 1 in 20 children under the age of 12. However, if you think your child may have ADHD, discuss your reasons for thinking this with your pediatrician.

Although children can show signs of ADHD at an early age, diagnosis does not usually occur until they start school. This is because children with ADHD often have the most trouble with the structure of school and symptoms may be more apparent in the classroom.



There is no single test for ADHD. The diagnostic evaluation starts when your child's pediatrician takes a complete health history to rule out any physical problems. Your pediatrician will also ask about your child's behavior at home and in school. In fact, your pediatrician will want to get more information from your child's teachers about school behavior. Your pediatrician also may need to examine your child further to rule out other possible problems that have similar symptoms. For example, some children have ADHD *plus* another problem, like a learning disability or other behavioral problem. If this is the case, your pediatrician will provide advice on treatment for both.

ADHD can be hard to identify and it may take some time before it is diagnosed. Be patient and give your child a lot of emotional loving support until the cause of his or her problems can be found.

Management of ADHD

A child with ADHD can create a lot of stress for parents as well as the rest of the family. Without treatment, a child with ADHD will continue to be disruptive to the family. There are things that you can do, however, to help your child control his or her behavior.

Keep your child on a daily schedule. Try to keep the time that your child wakes up, eats, bathes, leaves for school, and goes to sleep consistent each day. Whenever possible, avoid putting your child in places that may be overly stimulating, like busy shopping malls.

Children with ADHD often get the attention of their parents when they do something wrong. It is important to reward your child with kind words, hugs, and occasional gifts for positive behavior. These kinds of positive reinforcement, and loving support from parents, family members, and friends, will help your child feel good about himself or herself.

Parents often get angry at their ADHD child's behavior and may resort to physical punishment. Corporal punishment like spanking, slapping, or hitting is not advisable. Instead, use more effective discipline techniques. For example, if your child's hyperactivity is frustrating you, try to ignore the behavior by walking away. If your child is overexcited, try distracting him with another activity. If your child acts out with hitting or biting, you may need to remove her from the situation. Quiet time alone (timeout) until your child calms down is a much better alternative to physical punishment. Discuss your child's behavior with him when he is calm and make sure he understands the consequences of that behavior.

The ADHD child in school

The structure and rules of the classroom are often hard for children with ADHD. Work with your child's teacher. By understanding your child's struggle, the teacher will be better able to help your child do better in school.

Small group settings are easier for ADHD children to handle and should be used whenever possible. ADHD children tend to become easily distracted by those around them in large groups. They also are easily bored and need constant reinforcement in order to complete tasks. For this reason, private tutors often work well. Many ADHD children get much more done in 30 minutes or an hour with a tutor than during an entire day at school.



It is important to remember that children with ADHD can do as well in school as their peers. ADHD does not mean a child is not smart. Children with ADHD may be disorganized and inattentive, but this is a result of the disorder, not their ability to learn. Once diagnosed and treated, children with ADHD can be helped to perform very well in school. If your child's pediatrician, teachers, and counselors work together and your child gets a lot of support from family and friends, your child can achieve academic success. Talk to your child's teachers and pediatrician about any special programs they might know of for ADHD children. Traditional special education is usually for children with learning disabilities, which may not be the ADHD child's problem. However, new programs that may be helpful are being developed.

Treatment

There is no cure for ADHD, but there are several ways it can be helped. With the counsel and cooperation of your child's pediatrician, teachers, counselors, and family members, your child can have a normal life in spite of this disorder.

Nonmedication therapies — As a parent of a child with ADHD, you may hear about all sorts of nondrug treatments. Many of these have not been proven to work. However, some of these therapies may be useful in some cases. They include:

- Play therapy. This may help a child who has fears and anxieties, but these are not the key problems among most ADHD children.
- Special physical exercises. These usually try to improve coordination and increase your child's ability to handle activities that can overstimulate them. Most ADHD children do have problems in these areas, but this is not the *cause* of ADHD. While these exercises may help, they seem to work mostly because they get parents to pay more attention to the child. This increases his or her self-esteem.
- Special diets. These are based on the unproven idea that certain foods cause ADHD. These diets look at specific groups of foods, such as additives, sugar, and foods that children are commonly allergic to, like corn, nuts, chocolate, shell-fish, or wheat. While there is scientific evidence that these diets do not work, many parents strongly believe they help. Some of these diets are healthy and will not cause harm. Make sure that if your child is on a special diet that you discuss it with your pediatrician and that it does not become a source of conflict with the rest of the family. Remember, no special diet alone can solve the problems of ADHD and should not be used as the only treatment for your child's behavior.

Parents need to be aware of treatments that may be dangerous to their child. These include megavitamin therapy and special vitamin and mineral supplements. Make sure you talk to your pediatrician before using *any* nondrug therapy for your child.

Medication — Stimulant drugs are very useful in the treatment of ADHD. It may seem strange to give stimulants to children with hyperactivity and attention deficit problems. Surprisingly, instead of making the child act out more, these drugs reduce the hyperactivity and increase the attention span. The drugs help children with ADHD control their behavior. A child using these drugs actually becomes quieter and more attentive.

For school-age children with ADHD, the most common medication used is Ritalin (methylphenidate hydrochloride). Other medications, such as Dexedrine (dextroamphetamine), Cylert (magnesium pemoline), tricyclics, and clonidine can also help. If medications are needed, your pediatrician will work with you to find the best drug for your child.



These medications are not addictive but occasionally have side effects. Side effects such as headaches, sleeplessness, loss of appetite, and depression may occur from these medicines. Make sure your child gets regular checkups from the pediatrician. This way, the pediatrician can monitor the dosage of the medication as well as your child's overall physical health.

Medication for children with ADHD should never be used as the *only* form of treatment. It also is important to work with teachers, counselors, and other family members to manage your child's behavior.

Attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity

Children who have attention deficit disorder without hyperactivity (ADD) have the same symptoms as ADHD except they do not show signs of overactivity. They may appear sluggish, anxious, shy, or unmotivated. School problems are common and they are often labeled lazy.

Children with ADD need the same treatment as children with ADHD. They may respond well to stimulant medications and may also benefit from the various non-medication therapies. Talk to your child's pediatrician if you think your child has ADD.

With early treatment, the outlook for children with ADHD is encouraging. Even though they will never outgrow the ADHD, the behaviors that are problematic now can help them later in life. It is usually much easier for children with ADHD to find success once they are freed from the structure of the classroom. Many of these children, once they become adults, choose careers that fit their behavioral styles such as entrepreneurs or work in the arts and entertainment fields. The help and support ADHD children receive today from their parents, teachers, and pediatricians can help them grow up to become successful and happy adults.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.



From your doctor

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