

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder - adults

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common behavioural disorder that affects around one in 20 people, mainly men. Until recently, it was thought that a child outgrew ADHD during adolescence, due to developmental changes in brain chemistry. However, it seems that seven out of 10 children with ADHD mature into adults with ADHD. A person with ADHD has difficulty paying attention, controlling impulsive behaviours and keeping thoughts on track.

Symptoms of ADHD

A person with ADHD may:

- Have unpredictable mood swings
- Make careless mistakes at work
- Find it hard to sustain attention in work or leisure
- Not seem to listen when spoken to directly
- Not follow instructions or finish tasks
- Find it hard to organise tasks and activities
- Avoid sustained mental effort in work
- Lose things like keys, paperwork and things needed for tasks
- Be easily distracted by other stimuli
- Be forgetful in daily activities
- Fidget with hands or feet, or squirm in their seat
- Find it hard to remain seated
- Constantly run to do things
- Be impatient
- Have trouble doing things quietly
- Talk excessively
- Blurt out things without thinking
- Have trouble waiting their turn in queues and other such situations
- Butt into conversations or other activities.

The impact on quality of life is profound

A person with ADHD may have difficulty maintaining relationships or holding down a job. If their condition was undiagnosed and untreated in childhood, their academic record may be poor. A lifetime of grappling with this behavioural disorder often means the person has low self-esteem. In many cases, a person with ADHD turns to drugs or alcohol in an attempt to cope with their feelings of frustration and failure. Rates of personality disorders and other psychological problems, such as anxiety or mood disorders, are high. On the other hand, an adult with properly managed ADHD often shows great imagination and creative flair.

Brain chemicals

Despite intensive research, the exact causes of ADHD remain unknown. Studies so far indicate that ADHD could be caused by structural and chemical differences in the brain. One theory is that a lack of a particular group of brain chemicals, called monoamines, may play a part. The fact that ADHD can, in some cases, be managed with drugs seems to support the theory that brain chemicals are at least partially involved.

Diagnosis of ADHD

It is important to obtain an accurate diagnosis. Symptoms of ADHD can be similar to those for anxiety, depression or other mental illness. To date, there is no single test to determine whether or not ADHD is present. A typical investigation might include:

- Ruling out other psychological problems that have similar symptoms to ADHD.
- Ruling out alcohol or drug abuse that might be responsible for the symptoms (although these problems may coexist with ADHD).
- Rating the person's current behaviour and lifestyle.
- Checking back to see if the person showed ADHD symptoms in childhood.
- Interviewing family, friends, spouse and others about the person's behaviour.
- Electroencephalograph (EEG) tests to check for abnormal brain wave patterns (this remains controversial, although some find it a useful diagnostic aid).

Treatment for ADHD

Treatment depends on the severity of the disorder, but can include:

- **Education** - to help the person understand and better manage their condition.
- **Lifestyle improvement** - such as cutting back or quitting drugs and alcohol, and taking up regular exercise.
- **Medication** - psychostimulant drugs are used.
- **Psychotherapy** - to address self-esteem problems or substance abuse.
- **Therapy** - to teach anger management, organisational skills or social skills, depending on the needs of the individual.
- **Vocational counselling** - to increase the person's chances of success and satisfaction in the workplace.
- **Family therapy** - when one member suffers with ADHD, the whole family suffers and needs support.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Psychiatrist
- Psychologist
- Attention Deficit Disorder Victoria (ADDVic) Tel. 1800 233 842

Things to remember

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder was once thought to affect only children, but symptoms can persist into adulthood.
- The cause is unknown, but problems with brain chemistry might play a part.
- Treatment options include medication, education and counselling.

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