

What is ADHD?

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a brain condition that makes it hard to concentrate and be organized. It can also cause fidgeting and other restless activity. There may be problems with family and other relationships. It used to be thought of as a children's disorder, but we now know it can last into adulthood.

What are the Symptoms of ADHD?

Symptoms of ADHD vary, but may include:

- Trouble getting things organized to start a task
- Problems remembering appointments or things you are supposed to do
- Fidgeting or feeling like you always have to be on the move
- Trouble working on a task until it is done
- Problems with sleep, work, school or relationships

Many people have symptoms of ADHD from time to time, however people with ADHD find these symptoms don't go away and interfere with their function and ability to have relationships with others.

How is ADHD diagnosed?

Adults think they have ADHD for various reasons. Sometimes parents have children who are diagnosed with ADHD and realize they have the same symptoms and have had those symptoms all their life. Others are trying to attend college or focus at work and realize they can't seem to pay attention or complete assignments.

There are no lab tests to diagnose ADHD. The only way to diagnose ADHD is to look for symptoms and to understand your medical and family history. Many of the symptoms of ADHD are found in people who don't have ADHD or who have other conditions. Your doctor or healthcare professional will follow a process that takes several steps to look at how you function at home, work, school, and in your relationships. It will likely take several visits and multiple sources of information to see if you have ADHD and/or some other problem. This is why you may not get a prescription for medication at your first visit. It is important to be patient with this process to make sure you get the correct diagnosis.



How will your doctor or healthcare professional figure out if you have ADHD? Some of the information your doctor or healthcare professional may need to make the diagnosis include:

- Surveys you fill out in the office or at home to look for ADHD symptoms you may be having now and to think about symptoms you may have had when you were younger.
- Surveys you fill out in the office or at home to look for other conditions, such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder.
- Discussion about how well you function day-to-day. This may include discussing how you get along with family, how you manage money, and if you have driving problems. It is often helpful to have people who know you well, such as teachers, co-workers, or family members give their thoughts about you.
- Discussion of your medical history, such as problems with seizures, sleep, side effects of current medications, etc.
- Your doctor may also order lab tests to screen your blood or urine for medications or drugs that may be causing your symptoms.

How is ADHD treated?

There is no cure for ADHD, but most people see improvement with treatments that may include:

- Learning about ADHD
- Learning skills for planning and organization
- Psychotherapy, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- Medication

Managing Adult ADHD

Pills don't replace skills!

Many people find that non-medication treatments are helpful with or without medication therapy. Time management, stress management and organizational skills can be used at home and at work. Some examples are how to break a task into "chunks" that are easier to complete, how to use lists and computerized schedules, and how to avoid distractions.

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) teaches people life skills that have been shown to be helpful for many conditions. Some examples where CBT has proven helpful include ADHD, migraines, sleep problems, depression, anxiety, and low back pain. CBT can be done with an individual therapist, in a group, or using self-help books. CBT is considered a brief therapy and often lasts several weeks to a few months.

CBT resources

- National Association of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy: www.nacbt.org/whatiscbt.htm
- *The Feeling Good Handbook* by David Burns.
- *Three Minute Therapy: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life* by Michael R. Edelstein.
- *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

Stimulant medications such as methylphenidate (Ritalin, Concerta), mixed amphetamines (Adderall), or lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse) are the most effective medications for ADHD. Common side effects include trouble sleeping, loss of appetite, and weight loss. Stimulant medications can increase blood pressure and heart rate, so are usually avoided in people with heart conditions or problems like uncontrolled high blood pressure. It is often a good idea to be on a long-acting stimulant, such as Concerta or Vyvanse, because these medications will control your symptoms for much of the day. Even if you think you only need symptom control for attending classes or managing your work schedule, ADHD impacts routine activities, such as driving and interacting with family and friends. Stimulant medications may be abused or stolen, so it is very important to follow the dose instructions carefully and store your medication in a safe place.

The non-stimulant medications avoid the risk of abuse, but they take weeks to have their full effect. The most common non-stimulant medications include atomoxetine (Strattera) and guanfacine (Intuniv). Common side effects of atomoxetine include upset stomach, decreased appetite, nausea, dizziness, tiredness, and mood swings. It is rare, but some people report having thoughts of suicide after starting atomoxetine. Common side effects of guanfacine are dry mouth, sedation, and headache.

Where can you find more information?

- American Academy of Family Physicians: <http://familydoctor.org> Click on "Diseases and Conditions" then type "ADHD" in the search box.
- WebMD: www.webmd.com/add-adhd
- Mayo Clinic: www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/adult-adhd/home/ovc-20198864
- *Delivered from Distraction* by Edward Hallowell and John Ratey.
- *More Attention, Less Deficit: Success Strategies for Adults with ADHD* by Ari Tuckman.
- *ADHD: What Every Parent Needs to Know* by the American Academy of Pediatrics.



Medications

Several kinds of medications are effective for treating ADHD. Your doctor or healthcare professional will work with you to find the right medication, dosage and schedule. There are two general categories of medications: *stimulants* and *non-stimulants*.