Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

**Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a group of behavioural symptoms that include inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness.**

Common symptoms of ADHD include:

* a short attention span or being easily distracted
* restlessness, constant fidgeting or over activity
* being impulsive

ADHD can occur in people of any intellectual ability, although it is more common in people with learning difficulties. People with ADHD may also have additional problems, such as sleep and anxiety disorders.

Symptoms of ADHD tend to be first noticed at an early age, and may become more noticeable when a child's circumstances change, such as when they start school. Most cases are diagnosed in children between the ages of 6 and 12.

The symptoms of ADHD usually improve with age, but many adults who are diagnosed with the condition at a young age will continue to experience problems.

Getting help

Many children go through phases where they are restless or inattentive. This is often completely normal and does not necessarily mean they have ADHD.

However, you should consider raising your concerns with your child's teacher, their school's special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) or GP if you think their behaviour may be different to most children their age.

It's also a good idea to speak to your GP if you are an adult and you think you may have ADHD, but you were not diagnosed with the condition as a child.

What causes ADHD?

The exact cause of ADHD is unknown, but the condition has been shown to run in families, and research has identified a number of possible differences in the brains of people with ADHD compared to those who don't have the condition.

Other factors that have been suggested as potentially having a role in ADHD include:

* being born prematurely (before the 37th week of pregnancy)
* having a low birthweight
* smoking, alcohol or drug abuse during pregnancy

How common is ADHD?

ADHD is the most common behavioural disorder in the UK. It's unknown exactly how many people have the condition, but most estimates suggest if affects around 2-5% of school-aged children and young people.

Childhood ADHD is more commonly diagnosed in boys than girls.

Girls with ADHD often have a form of the condition where the main symptoms relate to problems with attention rather than hyperactivity, which can cause less noticeable symptoms. It is therefore possible that ADHD could be underdiagnosed in girls, and could be more common than previously thought.

How ADHD is treated

There is no cure for ADHD, but it can be managed with appropriate educational support, advice and support for parents and affected children, alongside medication, if necessary.

Living with ADHD

Looking after a child with ADHD can be challenging, but it is important to remember that they cannot help their behaviour.

Some issues that may arise in day-to-day life include:

* getting your child to sleep at night
* getting ready for school on time
* listening to and carrying out instructions
* being organised
* social occasions
* shopping

Symptoms of ADHD

**The symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can be categorised into two sets of behavioural problems.**

These categories are:

* inattentiveness
* hyperactivity and impulsiveness

Most people with ADHD have problems that fall into both these categories, but this is not always the case.

For example, some people with the condition may have problems with inattentiveness, but not with hyperactivity or impulsiveness. This form of ADHD is also known as attention deficit disorder (ADD), and it can sometimes go unnoticed because the symptoms may be less obvious.

Symptoms in children and teenagers

The symptoms of ADHD in children and teenagers are well defined, and they are usually noticeable before the age of six. They occur in more than one situation, such as at home and at school.

The main signs of each behavioural problem are detailed below.

**Inattentiveness**

The main signs of inattentiveness are:

* having a short attention span and being easily distracted
* making careless mistakes – for example, in schoolwork
* appearing forgetful or losing things
* being unable to stick at tasks that are tedious or time-consuming
* appearing to be unable to listen to or carry out instructions
* constantly changing activity or task
* having difficulty organising tasks

**Hyperactivity and impulsiveness**

The main signs of hyperactivity and impulsiveness are:

* being unable to sit still, especially in calm or quiet surroundings
* constantly fidgeting
* being unable to concentrate on tasks
* excessive physical movement
* excessive talking
* being unable to wait their turn
* acting without thinking
* interrupting conversations
* little or no sense of danger

These symptoms can cause significant problems in a child's life, such as underachievement at school, poor social interaction with other children and adults, and problems with discipline.

Related conditions in children and teenagers

Although not always the case, some children may also have signs of other problems or conditions alongside ADHD, such as:

* [**anxiety disorder**](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Anxiety/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – which causes your child to worry and be nervous much of the time; it may also cause physical symptoms, such as a rapid heartbeat, sweating and dizziness
* **oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)**– this is defined by negative and disruptive behaviour, particularly towards authority figures, such as parents and teachers
* **conduct disorder** – this often involves a tendency towards highly antisocial behaviour, such as stealing, fighting, vandalism and harming people or animals
* [**depression**](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Depression/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* **sleep problems** – finding it difficult to get to sleep at night, and having irregular sleeping patterns
* [**autistic spectrum disorder (ASD)**](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autistic-spectrum-disorder/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – this affects social interaction, communication, interests and behaviour
* [**epilepsy**](http://www.nhs.uk/epilepsy) – a condition that affects the brain and causes repeated fits or seizures
* [**Tourette’s syndrome**](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/Tourette-syndrome/Pages/Introduction.aspx) – a condition of the nervous system, characterised by a combination of involuntary noises and movements called [tics](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Tics/Pages/Introduction.aspx)
* **learning difficulties**– such as [dyslexia](http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Dyslexia/Pages/Introduction.aspx)