

What is ADHD?

This handout explains what ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) is and ways to manage the diagnosis.

ADHD is a common behavior disorder that affects 1 in 10 school age children. Children with ADHD have a hard time sitting still, paying attention, and finishing tasks.

The cause of ADHD is not always clear. However, we know that it often runs in families.

Symptoms of ADHD

A child with ADHD may have one or more of these symptoms, but most have several of them:

Inattention

- Trouble paying attention.
- Difficulty staying focused and organized.
- Difficulty following directions at school and in daily activities.

Hyperactivity

- A hard time staying seated.
- Always seem to be “on the go”.

Impulsivity

- Acts without thinking.
- Has trouble taking turns and interrupts a lot.

Children misbehave at times. Children with ADHD often find it hard to behave in many settings (home, school, team sports and camps). They tend to have more behavioral problems than other kids the same age. This can make it hard for a child to do well in school and other group activities.

Finding Out if Your Child Has ADHD

If your child has ADHD, the symptoms often:

- Start before your child is 7 years old.
- Have been present for more than 6 months.

Call your child’s doctor if you think your child may have ADHD. You should know:

- It is hard to diagnose ADHD in children younger than 5 years.
- The doctor will ask about how your child behaves at home, school and other places. The doctor may have you and your child’s teacher fill out forms to learn about your child’s behavior.
- Other problems can have the same symptoms as ADHD, anxiety, learning problems or depression.

Are there medical tests for ADHD?

There are no reliable medical test for ADHD at this time. Blood tests, computer tests; x-rays, like MRIs or CAT scans; or brain-wave tests don’t help diagnose ADHD. Your child’s doctor may have other reasons for ordering these tests. Ask the doctor if you have any questions.

Making a Plan

There are ways to help a child with ADHD. As a parent, you are very important in the treatment process. Your child’s doctor will help you plan for managing your child’s ADHD. Most plans include:

Medicine: Medicines called stimulants are safe and work well for most children. These medicines help children with ADHD pay attention and control their impulsive behavior.

Your child's doctor will help find what works best for your child. If stimulants are not helping your child, your doctor may suggest other options. They will work with you to find one that works. It is important for your child to have regular checkups when taking medicine. This is to track how well the medicine is working.

Behavior Therapy: This approach focuses on helping children learn ways to replace bad habits with good ones. Examples include:

- Setting clear, small goals.
- Accepting slow progress.
- Find things your child can do well.
- Helping your child stay "on task."
- Give fitting rewards.
- Give fitting consequences.
- Stick with the system!

Working with the school: Your child's school should work with you and your child's doctor.

Two federal laws say that schools must follow these regulations when children have significant learning problems:

- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B (IDEA).
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

These laws say public schools must:

- Evaluate a child with learning problems.
- Use teaching methods that meet children's learning needs.
- Give extra help when needed.

It may take time to find the right treatment for your child. Treatment with both medicine and behavior therapy helps most school-aged children with ADHD. However, it may not fix all the problems.

Know that you are not alone. Being a parent of a child with ADHD can be hard. Seek counseling if you feel overwhelmed or hopeless. Ask your child's doctor where you can find this kind of help.

Answers to Common Questions

Will my child outgrow ADHD?

ADHD tends to last into adulthood. The biggest problems for most children are noted during the school years.

Do children get "high" on stimulants?

Stimulants do not make a child high. It is important for each child to receive the right medicine for them at the correct dose. Regular visits with the doctor are an important part of the treatment plan.

Do schools put children on ADHD medicine?

Teachers are often the first to notice signs of ADHD but only a doctor can detect and prescribe medicine.

Your health care team may have given you this information as part of your care. If so, please use it and call if you have any questions. If this information was not given to you as part of your care, please check with your doctor. This is not medical advice. This is not to be used for diagnosis or treatment of any medical condition. Because each person's health needs are different, you should talk with your doctor or others on your health care team when using this information. If you have an emergency, please call 911. Copyright ©6/2019. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7902.