

Health Facts for You

UWHealth

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a common behavior disorder that affects 1 in 10 school age children. This handout explains what ADHD is and ways to manage it. The cause of ADHD is not always clear. However, we know that it often runs in families.

Symptoms

Children with ADHD have a hard time sitting still, paying attention, and finishing tasks. If your child has ADHD, the symptoms often start before your child is 7 years old. A child with ADHD may have one or more of these symptoms:

Inattention

- Trouble paying attention
- Trouble staying focused and organized
- Trouble following directions

Hyperactivity

- Has a hard time staying seated
- Always seems 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 in other group activities.

Diagnosing ADHD

Call your child’s doctor if your child has symptoms of ADHD that have been present for more than 6 months. ADHD is hard to diagnose in children younger than 5 years.

The doctor will ask you 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, such as, anxiety, learning problems or depression.

Tests

There are no reliable tests 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. Neuropsychological testing is not needed to diagnose ADHD.

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 create a plan to manage your child’s ADHD. Your child’s plan may include:

- Medicine
- Behavior therapy

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.

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 helps 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.”
- Giving fitting rewards.
- Giving fitting consequences.
- Sticking with the system!

Working with Your Child’s School

Two federal laws say that schools must follow certain regulations when children have significant learning problems.

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

These laws say public schools must:

1. Evaluate a child with learning problems.
2. Use teaching methods that meet children’s learning needs.
3. Give extra help when needed.

Many children with ADHD do not need an individualized education program (IEP). Many students with ADHD do well under a plan with these types of supports:

- Sitting the child in an area of the classroom with less distractions or sitting them by others who can help them stay on task.
- Breaking up big projects into smaller, more manageable parts.
- Making directions short and clear. Repeating as needed.
- Asking them to repeat directions.
- Having regular check-ins with the teacher. This can help the child stay organized and plan ahead.
- Giving the child short, scheduled breaks throughout the day.
- Giving the child extra time on tests and assignments.
- Providing distraction-free testing.
- Having shorter assignments.
- Avoiding busy work and repetitive assignments. The focus of their work should be to show their understanding.

Common Questions

Will my child outgrow ADHD?

ADHD tends to last into adulthood. Most children tend to have more problems with it 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 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.

Where can I find more help?

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.

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 ©5/2021. University of Wisconsin Hospitals and Clinics Authority. All rights reserved. Produced by the Department of Nursing. HF#7902.