



ADHD: Find Out the Facts

Symptoms

Here are some common symptoms of ADHD*:

1. Difficulty staying focused on things like conversations, reading, or meetings.
2. Spacing out or missing things when others are talking.
3. Forgetting a lot of things, like trying to keep track of chores or appointments.
4. Getting distracted easily by things like sounds or your own thoughts.
5. Avoiding things that take a lot of mental effort like filling out forms or completing big projects.
6. Losing things frequently.
7. Difficulty organizing tasks and responsibilities,
8. Difficulty “using time wisely” or meeting deadlines.
9. Having a hard time paying attention to detail and often making careless mistakes.
10. Finding it difficult to follow instructions or finish things.
11. Interrupting others frequently or struggling to respect their space/things.
12. Difficulty waiting your turn, like when standing in line.
13. Talking a lot.
14. Blurting things out without hearing the whole question or statement.
15. Fidgeting a lot or squirming in your seat.
16. Leaving seat when you should be sitting.
17. Often being uncomfortable being still and/or liking to keep moving
18. Difficulty being quiet.
19. Feeling restless and moving around even when you really should not.

*Checklist includes DSM-V criteria for ADHD as well as “soft signs” of ADHD

Having 6 or more of the above symptoms signals the possibility of ADHD and the desirability of getting a more thorough assessment. However, if you or someone you know has a significant number of these symptoms, this does not automatically mean that they have ADHD.

Is ADHD Real?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders among children and adolescents today. Although the real “cause” of ADHD is not known, researchers studying ADHD suggest real structural differences in a child’s brain. What might look like perpetual behavioral choices such as being lazy, sloppy, forgetful, or not being on time, are mainly behaviors that originate from real differences in the brain’s structure and activity. So, the answer to the first question is: Yes, ADHD is real.

Is ADHD Over-Diagnosed?

Across countries and continents, the “true prevalence” of ADHD is estimated to be around 4%. However, diagnosis rates for children are much higher in the U.S. (9-11%). But for adults, it’s another story. Adults tend to be underdiagnosed. Less than 1 out of 6 adults who have ADHD are actually aware they have it. So, the answer to the second question is: Yes, ADHD is currently over-diagnosed in children but is often underdiagnosed in adults.

Why does overdiagnosis happen more in children? This makes sense when you think about how children change and grow so quickly, and how many symptoms of ADHD overlap with other conditions, say a depressed child who can’t focus, or an anxious child who uses hyperactivity to cope with anxiety. So, what can look like overdiagnosis might in fact be mis-diagnosis.



Can Adults Have ADHD?

In adults, ADHD symptoms are often overlooked or minimized because they look so different than in kids AND most adults have developed so many “cover-ups” i.e. behaviors to cover up their symptoms, that ADHD can be really hard to detect. So yes, both adults and kids can be diagnosed with ADHD. In addition, ADHD is often misdiagnosed both in children and adults.

And Why Should I Care?

Persistent, untreated symptoms of ADHD often lend themselves to many undesirable and unwanted effects. For instance, adults with untreated ADHD often experience persistent relationship difficulties (partner accusing them of not listening or forgetting important facts, dates and duties), work difficulties (forgetting deadlines, procrastination, inability to multitask, difficulty focusing during meetings) which can often lead to reprimands or even job loss, mental “crashing i.e. periods of being overwhelmed and wanting to give up, chronic disorganization (difficulty locating important items or keeping car/home/desk clean), impaired driving (car accidents or frequent citations caused by inattention), and substance abuse (caffeine, alcohol, cigarettes and other drugs are often used to stimulate or self-medicate).

In children, ADHD is one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorders. Children whose symptoms are untreated can often drive their parents “crazy” with feeling like they have to constantly be reminded to do chores, do schoolwork, put away their belongings, get organized and so on. Multiple reminders often have no impact in ability to remember on their own. Self-esteem starts to suffer and kids may even become defiant. They may lose motivation and even pretend to be lazy because “nothing seems to work” and being called lazy may be a better option to constantly feeling like a failure. To answer another of the questions above: Kids do not grow out of these symptoms. They simply learn how to hide them better or cover up for them by pretending they don’t care or are just lazy.

Being able to know and understand what is going on with one’s brain can be life-altering. The brain cannot be changed to a very large extent (unless one is willing to take on an intensive lifestyle of brain- altering practices), but through using certain behavioral and neuropsychological methods, as well as conventional and alternative medical treatments a child or an adult with ADHD can be helped to function at their best in their current environment.



How Do I Get a Legitimate Diagnosis?

If you suspect you or someone you care about has ADHD, there are typically two paths to diagnosis. Your choice will depend upon how thorough and confirmatory you want the diagnostic process to be. One path is to make an appointment with a psychiatrist (a doctor who specializes in emotional and behavioral disorders) and obtain a psychiatric evaluation. These physicians will gather background information from you and look at the symptoms you are struggling with. Typically within the span of an hour long intake, they will make a diagnosis and suggest a course of treatment. Medication is usually suggested as the first line of treatment along with some behavioral therapy, if their assessment shows you do have ADHD).

A second path is to seek out a psychologist who does comprehensive psychological assessments to differentiate ADHD from other disorders and deliver a careful diagnosis, rather than relying on a quick checklist. Although this process is more time-consuming, typically taking 5-8 hours of psychological testing, the results are extremely reliable. Comprehensive testing looks at many different possible causes of difficulties, including depression, anxiety, ADHD, learning disabilities, autism spectrum disorders, addiction, reaction to trauma, personality traits, and environmental factors (e.g., home or school environment).

Through this thorough method a psychologist can not only make an accurate diagnoses, they can also "rule out" other problems. This is important because people can have more than one problem at a time. For example, people diagnosed with ADHD have a much higher chance of also having an Autism Spectrum Disorder or a Learning Disability than do people without ADHD. Knowing all the conditions that exist allows you to seek the appropriate combination of treatments. Knowing both what is going on and what isn't going on allows us to make very specific recommendations that are the most likely to be effective and efficient.



The first goal of comprehensive testing is to come to clinically valid and reliable conclusions about a person's functioning - including detailing a person's strengths, weaknesses, and diagnoses. Once this is known, you can move forward with the second goal: obtaining appropriate treatment. It is certainly common sense that you shouldn't treat something until you know what you are going to treat. If you went to your doctor and he told you he didn't know what was causing your symptoms, but wanted you to try a medicine based on a hunch, you certainly wouldn't take it. Psychological treatment is the same. You don't want to waste time and resources by trial and error - you want to know what the cause of the problem is, so that the first treatment you try is the correct one. And to answer another one of the questions above: **Yes, it is possible to get an accurate diagnosis through comprehensive testing.**

Brian Pearson, Ph.D.

Why Do We Care So Much About Detecting and Accurately Diagnosis ADHD?

To answer this question let's take a look at what happens if we do not diagnose or effectively treat ADHD. Here are some statistics to ponder. Over the course of their lifetime, people with untreated ADHD experience:

- 6x the risk of alcohol/drug abuse or addiction (especially marijuana and alcohol)
- 4x the risk of unplanned pregnancy and STDs
- 4x the risk of being hit by a car while walking
- Increased contact with the judicial system -jail, prison, etc.
- More tickets, accidents, revoked or suspended driver's licenses
- Reduced life expectancy
- Increased risk of accidental death, injury, including head injury
- Under-education compared to intelligence and family education
- Under-employment compared to intelligence and family history
- Greater frequency of job change
- More turnover in friendships and romantic relationships
- More marital conflict and double the rate of divorce

On the flip side, true understanding of one's strengths and weaknesses can set the stage for finding compassionate and creative ways of optimizing functioning, thereby reducing long-term negative outcomes, jump starting motivation, and improving self-esteem. Here's to new beginnings!

