

What is ADHD?



ADHD MATTERS

Raising awareness in Northamptonshire

ADHD is a developmental disorder that occurs in 1-3% of the population. It is more likely to be diagnosed in boys than girls. Girls often have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) without the hyperactivity or impulsivity that gets children with ADHD noticed. ADHD cannot be caught and ADHD is not related to intelligence; children with all levels of ability can have it and it affects those from all walks of life.

Causes of ADHD

It is still not known exactly what causes of ADHD but scientific research found the first direct evidence that ADHD is a genetic condition. They found that children with ADHD were more likely to have small segments of their DNA duplicated or missing than other children. The team said that this provided strong evidence that ADHD is a neuro-developmental disorder or in other words that the brains of children with ADHD differ from those of other children. A strong genetic component of ADHD has long been suspected. More than half of all parents with ADHD will have a child with the disorder. Many of the genes that have been identified as possibly contributing to the development of ADHD are those that control some types of neurotransmitter. A neurotransmitter is a chemical substance that transmits signals between nerve cells in the brain.

ADHD is not entirely genetic. Scientific research also found that children with ADHD experience a developmental delay in the frontal regions of the brain. This area, the prefrontal cortex, which is believed to control "executive function", develops more slowly. Executive functions are mental activities that allow self-control such as planning, restraining outbursts, problem solving, sustaining effort and keeping focused. Therefore it suggests that the core symptoms of ADHD – Hyperactivity, impulsiveness, and inattention – may be due to problems with executive function.

Further studies have shown that people with ADHD can have different levels of some neurotransmitters, dopamine and noradrenaline, which are both involved in executive functions, which suggests that an imbalance of these neurotransmitters in the brain is important in ADHD.

Other causes

Many things can affect a baby's brain either before or after birth which could make the baby more likely to develop ADHD. Brain diseases, brain damage, birth trauma, head injury, and low birth weight, along with a mother who drinks to excess, smokes or takes drugs during pregnancy can also increase the chances of developing ADHD.

There is little evidence that particular types of food or additives play much of a role in causing ADHD. Some studies have found that some children with ADHD have lower levels of essential fatty acids such as omega 3 but is it not clear what part they play in the disorder. It may be that these children are unable to absorb these fats as well as others or they may lack the enzyme that converts these fatty acids into other substances in the body. Changing the diet of children with ADHD has shown little evidence of any benefit.

There are some aspects of the family environment that are found more often in children with ADHD. Things such as poor relationships between parents, lower socio-economic status, mental health problems and poor parenting skills are unlikely to be the cause of ADHD. However a child's home life can affect the severity of symptoms and having a child with ADHD in the family can be very stressful and have a huge impact on family life. Even "good" parents trying to cope with the behaviour of a child with ADHD will show signs of stress, short temper, depression and appear poor at disciplining the child and to those who know nothing about ADHD they may seem like "bad" parents with merely naughty, poorly behaved children.

Types of ADHD

Most children appear to be unable to concentrate, be over active, or act without thinking at some point in their lives but ADHD children will show particular and exceptional difficulties with inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity which have a profound effect on their learning and behaviour and which they seem to be unable to control. No two children with ADHD will show exactly the same symptoms, behaviours or degrees of behaviour.

There are three broad groups of symptoms:

Inattention

Has difficulty paying and sustaining attention

Does not appear to listen

Struggles to follow and remember instructions

Has difficulty with organizing tasks, poor time management, problems managing sequential tasks

Avoids or dislikes tasks requiring sustained mental effort

Is easily distracted by extraneous stimuli

Forgets even regular daily activities

Often loses things that are needed such as school books, pens, sports equipment

Hyperactive-Impulsive

Fidgets or taps with hands or feet or squirms in chair

Has difficulty remaining seated when being seated is expected

Runs around or climbs in situations where it is inappropriate to do so

Has difficulty engaging in activities quietly

Acts as if driven by a motor – always "on the go"

Talks excessively

Blurts out answers before questions have been completed

Has difficulty waiting or taking turns

Interrupts others conversations or intrudes upon others by using their things without permission

ADHD – Combined Type

Meets both inattentive and hyperactive / impulsive criteria

All children will show these behaviours from time to time but in children with ADHD these behaviours are also:

Present for more than 6 months and before the age of 7 years

Evident in more than one setting, e.g. home, school and socially

Severe enough to interfere with normal functioning for children of their age

Not explained by developmental level or other condition/difficulty

Co-Existing Conditions

Children with ADHD often have other conditions. Some will have a specific learning disability such as Dyslexia and other associated speech and language problems. Children with more severe ADHD symptoms are often also diagnosed with Oppositional Defiant Disorder, (often very disobedient with severe temper outbursts) or Conduct Disorder, (a pattern of serious anti-social behaviour, often in trouble at school or with the police).

It is believed that around 25% of children diagnosed with ADHD also have anxiety and/or depression. Treating this will help them to cope with their ADHD symptoms. Some will also be diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder which is marked by periods of intense highs or lows.

Children with ADHD may also show signs of an Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) such as Asperger's Syndrome, characterised by social, communication and social imagination problems. ADHD can also be associated with Dyspraxia, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Hyperlexia, Autism, and Tourettes Syndrome.

Sensory Issues

Children with ADHD often show signs of Sensory Issues and research is beginning to recognise that these children cannot process a barrage of stimuli. They find it extremely hard to cope with everyday sounds, smells, sights and touch. They are often extra sensitive to the texture of clothing and fabrics, labels in clothes or the texture of certain food, or may be unable to cope with loud noises, flickering lights or strong smells.

Their brains appear to be unable to cope with Sensory Overload and this can result in tantrums, anxiety and problems in the classroom or in social situations. These "meltdowns" appear to happen for no apparent reason and to be a complete over reaction to the situation. In time the situations that trigger a meltdown can be spotted before they build and calming action taken.

Sensory Issues affect all senses including a sense of justice and injustice; proprioception which leads to clumsiness; sense of humour or lack thereof; heat and cold leading to issues, for example, with not wearing coats in winter/ getting frustrated and angry when too hot in summer.

ADHD and Social Issues

Children with ADHD also have difficulties with social interaction. Their impulsive and hyperactive behaviour may upset other children. They can have a tendency to take over a conversation, act silly in a group in an effort to fit in, damage others possessions without meaning to, play too roughly and have poor motor skills often leading other children to label the ADHD child as bossy, silly, clumsy, rough and means all too often that they are avoided in the playground, not picked for teams or invited to parties. They then feel stupid, unpopular and rejected by their peers but do not understand why, which in turn can lead to loss of self-esteem. Children in these circumstances need a lot of support and reassurance to help them understand accepted social rules and to learn how they must behave in social situations.

Adolescents with ADHD present a special challenge as academic and organisational demands increase. In addition they also face typical adolescent issues such as discovering their identity, establishing independence, dealing with peer pressure.

Young people with ADHD can be particularly vulnerable because of their poor communication and social skills. Although they may be, for example, 15/16 and look like an 18/19 year old, their social and emotional maturity is probably only that of a 12/13 year old.

They are also vulnerable to being bullied if they are perceived as in some way "different" to their peers. They can be encouraged by others to do things that they really know are unacceptable and which if they thought first would not do. For example they are goaded into throwing an item across the classroom and will do it without stopping to think and, although they know the behaviour or action is wrong, they only realise after they have done it.

They may also have sequencing difficulties and be unable to recall an event or tell a story in the correct order. For example they may find it difficult to explain what had happened after a car accident or when giving a statement to the police as a witness.

Children and young people with ADHD may also respond to an unfamiliar situation in a way that others do not expect or understand and may display extreme behaviour as a result. They may also experience high levels of anxiety when in a new or unexpected situation which can exacerbate their ADHD behaviour. They may not understand the wider implications of a situation or how they are expected to behave. A lack of understanding of ADHD can lead to their behaviour potentially being seen as offending behaviour.

Parents

ADHD symptoms are very variable and not all children and young people will be severely affected. Some will seem to grow out of their symptoms as they become better able to manage the disorder themselves.

Parents often worry that they have done something wrong as their child does not behave as well as others. Keeping up with an ADHD child can be exhausting and place a strain on friendship with other families and relationships within the family. When your child forgets to do something on a daily basis, loses their school bag yet again or interrupts you for the hundredth time you may find you are overwhelmed with exasperation and shout at them. This makes you feel guilty as you know they cannot always help this behaviour.

However children with ADHD can be engaging, spontaneous and amusing and can be good company. Remember that not all those diagnosed with ADHD will have all of the symptoms or be affected to the same degree and that the sooner a child is diagnosed and the condition managed the child's long term outlook is less likely to be adversely affected.

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