

# What is the condition?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a group of behavioral symptoms that include inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness. Attention deficit disorder (ADD) is a sub-type of ADHD.

Common symptoms of ADHD include:

- a short attention span
- restlessness or constant fidgeting
- being easily distracted

ADHD can occur in people of any intellectual ability. However, many people with ADHD also have learning difficulties. They may also have additional problems such as sleep 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 starting school.

Young children are naturally active and easily distracted. However, if these features are excessive for a child's age and general developmental level, and affecting their daily life, they may indicate ADHD.

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

These behavioural problems are:

- inattentiveness
- hyperactivity and impulsiveness

It is not fully understood whether these problems are an extreme form of normal behaviour, or part of a separate range of behaviour.

## Types of ADHD

A person with ADHD usually has symptoms characteristic of one of the three subtypes of the condition. The subtypes are:

- ADHD mainly inattentive
- ADHD mainly hyperactive-impulsive
- ADHD combined

If your child has symptoms of all three behavioural problems – inattentiveness, hyperactivity and impulsiveness – they may have ADHD combined, which is the most common subtype of ADHD.

Alternatively, if your child has symptoms of inattentiveness but not hyperactivity or impulsiveness, they may have ADHD mainly inattentive. This form of ADHD is also known as attention deficit disorder (ADD).

Childhood ADHD is more commonly diagnosed in boys than girls, but this may be because disruptive behaviour, which the diagnosis may be partly based on, tends to be more common in boys than girls.

Girls with ADHD often have the mainly inattentive form of the condition, which may make them quiet and dreamy and can sometimes go unnoticed. It is therefore

possible that ADHD could be underdiagnosed in girls, and could be more common than previously thought.

## Symptoms in children and teenagers

The symptoms of ADHD in children and teenagers are well defined. The main symptoms of each behavioural problem are detailed below.

### *Inattentiveness*

The main symptoms of inattentiveness are:

- a short attention span
- 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
- being unable to listen to or carry out instructions
- being unable to concentrate
- constantly changing activity or task
- having difficulty organising tasks

### *Hyperactivity*

The main symptoms of hyperactivity are:

- being unable to sit still, especially in calm or quiet surroundings
- constantly fidgeting
- being unable to settle to tasks
- excessive physical movement
- excessive talking

### *Impulsiveness*

The main symptoms of impulsiveness are:

- being unable to wait for a turn
- acting without thinking
- interrupting conversations
- little or no sense of danger

If your child has ADHD, their symptoms usually become noticeable before the age of seven, with a diagnosis usually made between the ages of three and seven.

ADHD can cause problems in a child's life, and can often lead to 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, your child may also have other problems or conditions alongside ADHD. These are explained below.

## *Anxiety disorder*

Some children with ADHD may have an anxiety disorder that causes them to worry and be nervous most of the time. Your child may also have physical symptoms, such as a rapid heartbeat, sweating and dizziness. Read more information about [anxiety](#).

## *Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD)*

Oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) is common among children with ADHD. It is defined by negative and disruptive behaviour, particularly towards authority figures such as parents and teachers.

## *Conduct disorder*

Children who have conduct disorder have a tendency towards highly antisocial behaviour, such as:

- stealing
- fighting
- vandalism
- harming people
- harming animals

If your child is behaving in this way, book an appointment with your doctor as soon as possible.

## *Depression*

It is possible for children with ADHD to become depressed as a result of their condition.

## *Sleep problems*

Children with ADHD can be hyperactive and find it difficult to sleep at night. They may experience irregular sleeping patterns.

## *Epilepsy*

Epilepsy is a condition of the brain that causes seizures (fits).

## *Tourette's syndrome*

Tourette's syndrome is a condition of the nervous system (the nerves, brain and spinal cord) that causes involuntary movements and sounds.

## *Learning difficulties*

It is thought that around a third of children with ADHD also have learning difficulties, such as [dyslexia](#)(difficulty reading and spelling words).

The exact cause of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is not fully understood. It is thought ADHD is caused by a mix of genetic (inherited) and environmental factors.

## Genetics

ADHD tends to run in families and, in most cases, it is thought inheriting the condition is the most likely cause. Research shows that both parents and siblings of a child with ADHD are four to five times more likely to have ADHD themselves.

## Brain function and anatomy

Research shows that the way the brain works in people with ADHD differs from that of people who do not have the condition. It is thought chemicals in the brain that carry messages, known as neurotransmitters, do not work properly in people with ADHD. Also, people with the condition seem to display less activity in the parts of their brains that control activity and attention.

Some research shows that the frontal lobes, the part of the brain that controls decision-making, do not work as they should in people with ADHD. Other research indicates they may have imbalances in the levels of certain chemicals, such as noradrenaline and dopamine.

## Exposure to toxins during pregnancy

Women who drink alcohol when pregnant are more likely to have a child with ADHD. It is also thought that smoking and drug abuse can also increase the risks of ADHD in an unborn child.

## Being male

Boys are more commonly diagnosed with childhood ADHD than girls, and more men are diagnosed with the condition than women. Research suggests this could be because diagnosis tends to pinpoint loud, disruptive behaviour, which is more noticeable and more common in males than in females.

It could also be that ADHD is missed in girls because they tend to have the form of the condition defined by inattentiveness (ADHD mainly inattentive, or attention deficit disorder).

## Excessive exposure to television

There have been several studies that have looked at the relationship between children watching a lot of television at a very young age and the development of ADHD in later childhood.

There is not enough evidence to say television is definitely a cause of ADHD, but allowing children up to the age of three to watch several hours a day could contribute to attention problems and ADHD in later life.

## Other causes

Other possible causes of ADHD include:

- being born prematurely (before week 37 of the pregnancy)
- having a low birthweight

- brain damage either in the womb or in the first few years of life

ADHD is the most common behavioural disorder in the UK. It is estimated the condition affects 2-5% of school-aged children and young people.

ADHD can be a lifelong condition, and many children continue to have symptoms as a teenager and adult.

It is estimated that more than two out of three children diagnosed with ADHD will still have symptoms as teenagers. It is then estimated that two out of three of these teenagers will show symptoms as adults.

It is uncertain whether ADHD can occur in adults without first appearing in childhood.

There is no cure for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but treatment can alleviate your symptoms and make the condition much less of a problem in day-to-day life. ADHD can be treated using medication or therapy, but it is widely agreed a combination of both is the best way to treat it.

Treatment will usually be arranged by a specialist, such as a paediatrician or psychiatrist (an expert in mental and emotional health), although your condition may be monitored by your GP.

Read more information about [how ADHD is treated](#).

Living with 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
- arriving at school on time
- listening to and carrying out instructions
- social occasions
- shopping

Read about [living with ADHD](#) for information about ways to cope with these issues.

All young children are active, and it's normal for them to have lots of energy. Children should be active on a daily basis; getting lots of exercise is good for their health and it's fun. For tips and more information, go to [Get active: ideas and advice](#).

Many children are overactive. Some (around 3-9% of school-aged children and young people) suffer from attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which is what used to be known as hyperactivity.

A lot of children who have behaviour problems and difficulty concentrating are not overactive, or they may be suffering from only a mild form of hyperactivity. The challenge for parents and health professionals is to recognise the difference between normal behaviour problems and ADHD symptoms, which require early treatment.

## Tips on coping with an overactive child

- Keep to a daily routine. Routine can help if your child is restless or difficult. It can also help you to stay calm and cope with the strain.
- Dedicate time to your child. Because your child may be demanding your attention for most of the day (and sometimes the night too), you'll often have to say no to them. That will be easier to do and easier for your child to accept if there's a time each day when you give them all your attention.
- Avoid difficult situations. For example, keep shopping trips short.
- Try to go out every day. Go to a park, playground or other safe, open space where your child can run around and use up energy.
- Avoid giving your child cola drinks, tea and coffee. These all contain caffeine, which can make children hyperactive. Sugar can have a similar effect.
- Set small goals. Help your child to sit still or be controlled. Encourage them to concentrate for a very short time, then gradually build up. Remember, you can't transform your child's behaviour overnight.
- If these tips don't help, talk to your health visitor or GP. You can also get information from [the National Attention Deficit Disorder Information and Support Service \(ADDISS\)](#).
- [Health A-Z: ADHD](#)
- [Physical activity guidelines for children under five](#)
- [Get active: ideas and advice](#)

### Further information

- [Health A-Z: ADHD](#)
- [Physical activity guidelines for children under five](#)
- [Get active: ideas and advice](#)