

Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorder in children. The disorder is found in 3% to 5% of school-aged children and is more common in boys than in girls. Children with ADHD are often unable to focus their attention on a particular task for very long, may be hyperactive or fidgety, and are generally unorganized and impulsive. Some children with ADHD mainly have problems maintaining attention, some are mainly hyperactive and impulsive, and some have problems in both areas. Sometimes children with ADHD have poor grades in school and are slow to develop social skills.

An article in the October 9, 2002, issue of *JAMA* discusses information from imaging studies of the brains of children with ADHD.

SYMPTOMS AND SIGNS OF ADHD

Persisting for at least 6 months:

- Does not seem to listen
- Forgetful
- Has difficulty following instructions
- Has difficulty paying attention
- Is easily distracted
- Seems disorganized
- Always on the go
- Fidgets
- Has difficulty playing quietly
- Interrupts
- Leaves seat when shouldn't
- Talks excessively

DIAGNOSIS

Children who are diagnosed with ADHD must have many of the above symptoms and signs to an impairing degree and occurring much more frequently than would be expected for their age and maturational level. Diagnosis of ADHD must be based on a thorough evaluation to exclude other possible causes of the child's difficulties. This should include input from the child's family and teachers and evaluation of the child by health care professionals, usually including a pediatrician and child psychiatrist or child psychologist. An evaluation may take several hours and multiple doctor visits.

TREATMENT

Once a diagnosis is made, there are several treatment options, including behavioral therapy, special education programs, and medication. Parents and teachers can take part in treatment by positively reinforcing good behaviors with encouragement and being clear about behaviors that are unacceptable. Extra attention from teachers or smaller classroom sizes have also been effective in helping children with ADHD to learn.

Up to 70% to 80% of children with ADHD respond to stimulant medication. The medication often results in rapid improvement in symptoms. This kind of medication helps curb impulsive and overactive behaviors, allowing the child to focus and learn. Stimulant medication is usually well tolerated and has few side effects. Children who take stimulant medication for ADHD are not at greater risk for abusing drugs later in life.

Early identification, diagnosis, and treatment can help children with ADHD reach their full potential.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry
202/966-7300
www.aacap.org
- American Psychiatric Association
888/357-7924
www.psych.org/public_info/child.cfm
- National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)
301/443-4513
www.nimh.nih.gov
- National Mental Health Association (NMHA)
703/684-7722
www.nmha.org

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Sources: American Psychiatric Association, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, National Institute of Mental Health, National Mental Health Association

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