

What is Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder?

ADHD is one of the most common neurobehavioral disorders of childhood and can persist through adolescence and into adulthood. Currently the causes are unknown.

A person with ADHD has a chronic level of inattention, impulsive hyperactivity, or both such that daily functioning is compromised. The symptoms of the disorder must be present at levels that are higher than expected for a person's developmental stage and must interfere with the person's ability to function in different settings (e.g., in school and at home). A person with ADHD may struggle in important areas of life, such as peer and family relationships, and school or work performance for their entire lifetime.

How is Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Determined?

Six or more of the following symptoms of inattention have been present for at least 6 months (for ADD):

Inattention

1. Often does not give close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork, work, or other activities.
2. Often has trouble keeping attention on tasks or play activities.
3. Often does not seem to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Often does not follow instructions and fails to finish schoolwork, chores, or duties in the workplace (not due to oppositional behavior or failure to understand instructions).
5. Often has trouble with organization
6. Often avoids, dislikes, or doesn't want to do things that take a lot of mental effort for a long period of time (such as schoolwork or homework).
7. Often loses things needed for tasks and activities (e.g. toys, school assignments, pencils, books, or tools).
8. Is often easily distracted.
9. Is often forgetful in daily activities.

At least 6 of the following symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity have been present for at least 6 months (for ADHD):

Hyperactivity

1. Often fidgets with hands or feet or squirms in seat.
2. Often gets up from seat when remaining in seat is expected.
3. Often runs about or climbs when and where it is not appropriate (adolescents or adults may feel very restless).
4. Often has trouble playing or enjoying leisure activities quietly.
5. Is often "on the go" or often acts as if "driven by a motor".
6. Often talks excessively.

Impulsivity

1. Often blurts out answers before questions have been finished.
2. Often has trouble waiting one's turn.

Is There a Cure?

No cure or "quick fix" exists to treat ADHD. The symptoms, however, can be managed through a combination of efforts. Modifications need to be designed to assist the child in these areas:

behaviorally

educationally

with drug treatment (if necessary)

Behavioral modification

Behavior management is a skill. Some people naturally possess this skill. Others (like the ADHD child or person) must learn it. It requires practice — and it requires patience. Changing behavior takes time.

Behaviorally trained professionals often encourage the use of behavior modification charts. Charts are designed to provide the child with a clear picture of what behaviors are expected. The child then has the choice of whether to meet those expectations. Charts provide a visual and immediate feedback about the choices that the child makes regarding behavior.

Parents or teachers provide quick feedback to the child about his or her choices by delivering consequences. Charts provide high motivation and enable the child to develop an internal sense of self-control — specifically, that he or she can behave appropriately.

There are two basic types of chart programs.

- **Token Economy:** Here, the child earns tokens (chips, stickers, stars) for appropriate behavior. Tokens can be exchanged for various rewards (such as pizza or toys). They function like money does for most of us.
- **Response Cost:** In this chart program, the child is given the tokens for free. Tokens are withdrawn for inappropriate behavior (e.g., out of seat, off-task, etc.). In other words, the child starts with a pocket full of tokens and losing one each time he misbehaves just like we lose money if we have to pay a speeding ticket.

Educational modification

Many children with ADHD experience the greatest difficulty in school, where demands for controlling impulse and paying attention are the requirements for success. Although ADHD does not cause a child not to learn, it does decrease performance. Thus, in the school arena, ADHD is an educational performance problem. When little or nothing is done to help these children pay attention and control impulses, over time they will evidence academic achievement problems. This underachievement is not the result of an inability to learn. It is caused by the cumulative effects of missing important blocks of information from one school year to the next.

Generally, ADHD will affect the student in one or more of the following performance areas:

- Starting tasks
- Staying on task
- Completing tasks
- Interacting with others appropriately
- Following through on directions
- Producing work at consistently normal levels
- Organizing multi-step tasks.

The teacher and caregivers should work together to help the child succeed in school. It is widely known that ADHD children succeed better in classes where they are given quick or immediate academic feedback.

Modification with medication

Medication has proven effective for many children with ADHD. Most experts agree, however, that medication should never be the only treatment. The parents' decision to place a child on medication is a personal one and should be made after other options, such as behavior modification, have not succeeded.

Stimulants are the medication most widely prescribed for ADHD. These drugs — for example, Ritalin which is the most widely used, are believed to stimulate the action of the brain's neurotransmitters, which enables the brain to better regulate attention, impulse, and motor behavior. In general, the short-acting stimulant medications have few and mild side effects. However, all medications come with some degree of risk.

[Children and Adults with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder \(CHADD\)](#) is a national advocacy organization for individuals affected by ADHD. CHADD organizes local chapters for information and support.

[National Alliance for the Mentally Ill \(NAMI\)](#) is a national advocacy organization for those affected by mental illness in our country. NAMI provides general information and support opportunities for many mental illnesses. This link provides a fact sheet for ADHD.

[National Institute of Mental Health](#) held a consensus conference on Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in November, 1998. Searching this site, you will find the consensus statement that came from the meeting.

[The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs](#), co-sponsored the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention conference on ADHD. This site will provide information on educational policy and research related to ADHD.