

Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Definition

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a chronic condition that affects millions of children and often persists into adulthood. Problems associated with ADHD include inattention and hyperactive, impulsive behaviour. Children with ADHD may struggle with low self-esteem, troubled relationships and poor performance in school.

While treatment won't cure ADHD, it can help a great deal with symptoms. Treatment typically involves psychological counselling, medications or both.

Symptoms

ADHD has been called attention-deficit disorder (ADD) and hyperactivity. But ADHD is the preferred term because it describes both primary aspects of the condition: inattention and hyperactive-impulsive behaviour.

While many children who have ADHD tend more toward one category than the other, most children have some combination of inattention and hyperactive-impulsive behaviour. Signs and symptoms of ADHD become more apparent during activities that require focused mental effort.

In most children diagnosed with ADHD, signs and symptoms appear before the age of 7. In some children, signs of ADHD are noticeable as early as infancy.

Signs and symptoms of inattention may include:

- Often fails to pay close attention to details or makes careless mistakes in schoolwork or other activities
- Often has trouble sustaining attention during tasks or play
- Seems not to listen even when spoken to directly
- Has difficulty following through on instructions and often fails to finish schoolwork, chores or other tasks
- Often has problems organizing tasks or activities
- Avoids or dislikes tasks that require sustained mental effort, such as schoolwork or homework
- Frequently loses needed items, such as books, pencils, toys or tools
- Can be easily distracted
- Often forgetful

Signs and symptoms of hyperactive and impulsive behaviour may include:

- Fidgets or squirms frequently

- Often leaves his or her seat in the classroom or in other situations when remaining seated is expected
- Often runs or climbs excessively when it's not appropriate or, if an adolescent, might constantly feel restless
- Frequently has difficulty playing quietly
- Always seems on the go
- Talks excessively
- Blurts out the answers before questions have been completely asked
- Frequently has difficulty waiting for his or her turn
- Often interrupts or intrudes on others' conversations or games

You may suspect your child's behaviour is caused by ADHD if you notice consistently inattentive or hyperactive, impulsive behaviour that:

- Lasts more than six months
- Occurs in more than just one setting (typically at home and at school)
- Regularly disrupts school, play and other daily activities
- Causes problems in relationships with adults and other children

Tests and diagnosis

No single test for ADHD exists, which can make the disorder difficult to diagnose. Gathering as much information as possible about your child is the best way to get an accurate diagnosis and rule out other possible causes of your child's symptoms.

Lifestyle and home remedies

Because ADHD is a complex disorder and each person with ADHD is unique, it's hard to make recommendations that are right for every child. But some of the following suggestions may help:

Children at home

- **Show your child lots of affection.** Children need to hear that they're loved and appreciated. Focusing only on the negative aspects of your child's behaviour can harm your relationship with him or her and affect self-confidence and self-esteem. If your child has a hard time accepting verbal signs of affection, a smile, a pat on the shoulder or a hug can show you care. Look for behaviours for which you can compliment your child regularly.
- **Be patient.** Try to remain patient and calm when dealing with your child, even when your child is out of control. If you're calm, your child is more likely to calm down too.
- **Keep things in perspective.** Be realistic in your expectations for improvement — both your own and your child's.

- **Take time to enjoy your child.** Make an effort to accept and appreciate the parts of your child's personality that aren't so difficult. One of the best ways to do this is simply to spend time together. This should be a private time when no other children or adults interfere. Try to give your child more positive than negative attention every day.
- **Try to keep a regular schedule for meals, naps and bedtime.** Use a big calendar to mark special activities that will be coming up. Children with ADHD have a hard time accepting and adjusting to change. Avoid sudden transitions from one activity to another.
- **Make sure your child is rested.** Try to keep your child from becoming overtired, because fatigue often makes symptoms of ADHD worse.
- **Identify difficult situations.** Try to avoid situations that are difficult for your child, such as sitting through long presentations or shopping in supermarkets where the array of merchandise can be overwhelming.
- **Use timeouts or the loss of a privilege to discipline your child.** For children with ADHD, a timeout from social stimulation can be very effective. Timeouts should be relatively brief, but long enough for your child to regain control. The idea is to interrupt and defuse out-of-control behaviour. A timeout doesn't work for everything, but many parents have found that it's one of the best tools for managing the behaviour of an overactive or impulsive child.
- **Work on organization.** Help your child organize and maintain a daily assignment notebook and be sure your child has a quiet place to study. Group objects in the child's room and store in clearly marked spaces.
- **Find ways to improve your child's self-esteem and sense of discipline.** Children with ADHD often do very well with art projects, music or dance lessons, or martial arts classes, especially karate or tae kwon do. But don't force children into activities that are beyond their abilities.
- **Use simple words and demonstrate when giving your child directions.** Speak slowly and quietly and be very specific and concrete. Give one direction at a time. Stop and make eye contact with the child when giving directions.
- **Take a break yourself.** If you're exhausted and stressed, you're a much less effective parent.

Alternative medicine

There's little research that indicates that alternative medicine treatments can significantly reduce ADHD symptoms, although some do appear to help. These include:

- **Yoga.** There's growing evidence yoga may help alleviate symptoms of ADHD.
- **Special diets.** Most diets for ADHD involve eliminating foods thought to increase hyperactivity, such as sugar and caffeine, and common allergens such as wheat, milk and eggs. Some diets recommend eliminating artificial food colourings and additives. So far, studies haven't found a consistent link

between diet and improved symptoms of ADHD, though a limited number of studies suggest diet changes might make a difference.

- **Vitamin or mineral supplements.** While certain vitamins and minerals are necessary for good health, there's no evidence that supplemental vitamins or minerals can reduce symptoms of ADHD. "Megadoses" of vitamins — doses that far exceed the Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) — can be harmful.

Techniques for coping

Here are a few things that can help you and your child manage ADHD:

- **Structure your child's life.** You can help make change easier by ensuring that your child has the right kind of structure. For children with ADHD, structure doesn't mean rigidity or iron discipline. Instead, it means arranging things so that a child's life is as predictable, calm and organized as possible. Children with ADHD don't handle change well, and having predictable routines can make them feel safe as well as help improve behaviour. Give your child a few minutes warning — with a countdown — when it's necessary to change from one activity or location to another.
- **Provide positive discipline.** One of the best ways to instil new habits is to provide firm, loving discipline that rewards good behaviour and discourages destructive actions. Children with ADHD usually respond well to positive reinforcement, as long as it's genuinely earned. It's best to start by rewarding or reinforcing a new behaviour every time it occurs. After a short time, this probably won't be necessary, but you need to continue to let your child know that you're serious about encouraging new habits. Some parents object to rewards because they seem like bribery. But changing old habits is extremely hard, and rewards are simply a concrete way of recognizing your child's efforts.
- **Stay calm and set a good example.** You also need to set a good example by acting the way you want your child to act. Try to remain patient and in control — even when your child is out of control. If you speak quietly and calmly, your child is more likely to calm down, too.
- **Strive for healthy family relationships.** Finally, the relationship among all the family members plays a large part in managing or changing the behaviour of a child with ADHD.
- **Give yourself a break.** If you're the parent of a child with ADHD, be sure to give yourself a break now and then. Don't feel guilty for spending a few hours apart from your child. You'll be a better parent if you're rested and relaxed. And don't hesitate to ask friends, grandparents and other relatives for help.