

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

The National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov



Frequently asked questions about ADHD and teenagers.

Q: What is ADHD?

A: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a term used to describe a group of behaviors that most often appear in young, school-aged children.

Q: What are the symptoms of ADHD?

A: ADHD has a wide range of symptoms and it can be confusing and stressful for the child or teen. Young people mature at different rates and have different personalities, temperaments, and energy levels. Most of us get distracted, act impulsively, and struggle to pay attention at one time or another. It is when symptoms such as these, or acting in impulsive or reckless ways, daydreaming, becoming easily confused, or trouble sitting still for any length of time are hurting school work or impairing social activities that ADHD should be looked into.

Q: How is ADHD diagnosed?

A: Most ADHD symptoms usually appear early in life, often between the ages of 3 and 6. No single test can diagnose ADHD, but a licensed health professional such as a pediatrician or mental health specialist with experience in childhood mental disorders can first try to rule out other reasons for the symptoms.

Q: What causes ADHD?

A: Scientists are not sure what causes ADHD, although many studies suggest that genes (the “blueprints” for who we are) play a large role. Like many other illnesses, ADHD probably results from a combination of genetic and environmental factors such as nutrition, brain injuries, or social environment.

Q: Can a teenager have ADHD?

A: Most children with ADHD continue to have symptoms as they enter adolescence. Some may not be diagnosed until then. It’s not easy being a teenager, but for a teenager with ADHD, it can be especially hard. Staying with the recommended treatments, prescribed medications, psychosocial interventions, or a combination of the two, is also a challenge. Since inattention can be a problem, driving is another major concern for those with ADHD. Working cooperatively with parents, schools, and health care professionals is key.

Q: How is ADHD treated?

A: Available treatments focus on reducing the symptoms of ADHD and improving functioning. A one-size-fits-all treatment does not exist and sometimes several different medications or dosages must be tried before finding one that works for a specific person. Anyone taking medications must be closely watched by their doctors. Parents and doctors need to work together to decide which medication is best, if the young person needs medication only for school hours or also for evenings and weekends, and also what psychosocial interventions are best for that individual.

Q: What can be done if you or your friend has ADHD?

A: First you need to help reduce the stress caused by the frustration that is experienced with these conditions. It is best for you or your friend to work with your family and a team of health professionals to find the best treatments.

Q: Once diagnosed, what is there to do about it?

A: With the right kind of help, most children and teens with ADHD can usually improve dramatically.

Q: Where can I get more information?

A: Knowledge in genetics, brain imaging, and behavioral research is leading to a better understanding of the causes of the disorder, how to prevent it, and how to develop more effective treatments for all age groups. NIMH has studied ADHD treatments for pre-school

and school-aged children in a large –scale, long term studies. NIMH-sponsored scientists are continuing to look for the biological basis of ADHD and how differences in genes and brain structures may combine with life experiences to produce the disorder.

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