

What Adolescents Need to Know About ADHD

What is ADHD?

ADHD is classified as a neurodevelopmental disorder, but what does that mean? It means that the brain of someone with ADHD has developed somewhat differently and works differently than the non-ADHD brain. However, this does not mean that someone with ADHD is not as intelligent as someone without ADHD. In fact, ADHD does not impact intelligence or any other skills and talents that you may have, so having ADHD does not mean that you won't be able to succeed in the things that you want to do. Some things such as focusing and getting work completed may continue to be more difficult and require assistance, strategies, accommodations and possibly treatment be put in place to help you attain your goals.

There are three common symptoms of ADHD, difficulty regulating attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. We also know that people with ADHD have difficulty with, or are impaired, in regulating and displaying their emotions in appropriate ways. They become more easily frustrated and angry and are then less able to deal with their frustration appropriately. In other words, they react more impulsively and find it difficult to deal with and express strong emotions without blowing up, crying, etc. Those with ADHD may also find it more difficult to let things go and dwell on bad or angry feelings beyond what is considered usual.

People with ADHD do not all express their ADHD symptoms in the same way, nor do they all have ADHD to the same degree. ADHD symptoms can be mild to severe, include hyperactivity and impulsivity or not, and come with other disorders.

The Three Different Presentations of ADHD

Inattentive Presentation

If someone only has a problem with regulating their attention, they are diagnosed with the Primarily Inattentive presentation. You may have heard this called, Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD without hyperactivity, but we medically don't use that term anymore. Adolescents with this presentation would not have a significant problem with hyperactivity or impulsivity.

Hyperactive-Impulsive Presentation

The Primarily Hyperactive-Impulsive presentation is very rare and is exactly what it sounds like. People with this type of ADHD would not have a problem regulating their attention. Adolescents may grow out of their hyperactivity, or learn to channel it into more productive activities like sports. Adolescents and grown-ups also often describe ADHD as having an internal feeling of restlessness. Their mind is always on the go.

Combined Presentation

The most common sub-type of ADHD is called the Combined Presentation. If you have this subtype, you would have problems with regulating your attention, have a high level of activity and have problems with impulsivity. Impulsivity in adolescents can exhibit as problems with acting before remembering and considering the consequences. During adolescence this can cause more serious consequences than in childhood.

Ways in Which ADHD Might Impact Adolescents

Attention

In school, adolescents with ADHD have difficulty paying attention, staying focused, and getting their work completed on time. Subjects, assignments, tasks and teachers that they find boring and repetitive are more of an issue than things they find interesting. There are strategies that you can use to help with this issue, since we all need to do boring things some of the time.

Although most people think that ADHD is only a problem with paying attention, it is only part of the problem. You might find that in some situations you over-focus or hyper-focus. If something is stimulating like playing a computer game or texting or if you find something very interesting you may not be able to break or switch your focus. Others may misinterpret this as a sign that you can pay attention when you choose to, but over focusing at times is really a symptom of ADHD.

Most people don't know this, but ADHD is really a problem with regulating attention and not just a problem with paying attention. It can be a problem with under and over focusing, switching focus and prioritizing your focus on what is really important, rather than that "shiny object". Another way to describe it is that someone with ADHD does not have access to the controller that regulates their attention.

Executive Functioning (EF)

We do know that one area of the brain that is affected with ADHD is called the frontal lobe. As well as regulating attention this part of the brain is also used for executive functioning skills. This is the part of the brain that can be thought of as the CEO, conductor or coordinator of the brain. EF skills include things such as organization, hindsight, foresight, problem solving, active working memory, time management and social skills. For more information on EF skills please access this section under Understanding ADHD – General – [Executive Functioning](#).

Some Examples of How ADHD can Effect You

When trying to pay attention you may be more easily distracted by noises and other things around you than most other people.

You may also find that you have problems with impulsivity, or stopping yourself long enough to think things through before acting. This may sometimes cause you to get into trouble, but you may also be confused about why you seem to be getting into trouble. It may help to get feedback about this from someone you trust that understands about your ADHD.

You might become frustrated more easily than others and find it harder to control your reaction to this frustration. You might lash out and say or do things that you later regret. Many teens and even adults with ADHD feel that everyone around them does not understand what they are experiencing or doing. This may be true to some extent, especially if others are not knowledgeable about ADHD. It may be helpful to implement strategies to help stop yourself when you are being impulsive so you can make better choices.

You may find that you have trouble keeping track of things and may end up losing them.

You may have a hard time thinking through a problem and coming up with solutions, especially when your emotions are in high gear.

People may complain that you are too silly or not social enough.

When you are given a large assignment at school you may feel overwhelmed with the amount of work, even if you are given a long time to do it. There may be several reasons for this. You might procrastinate, or put off starting your work, and then find yourself in trouble because you don't have

enough time to get it done, or you may not know where to begin or how to break the assignment into smaller pieces. You may need someone to help you “chunk” the large project into smaller pieces so that you find it manageable. You may also need help initiating or starting your work.

Do people complain that you do not get things done on time or that you are always late? This may be caused by a problem managing your time and being unable to accurately estimate how long something will take you to do. Of course procrastination plays into this as well.

Another interesting thing about ADHD is that it is not always consistent. There may be minutes or hours where your attention and focus are better, and times when they are worse, even when you are trying your best. Unfortunately, this may make it look like you are lazy and not trying all the time, but it is simply a part of ADHD.

Why Me?

We know that most of the time ADHD is hereditary. This means that it is passed down to children through their parents' genes. Often parents are diagnosed with ADHD after their children are diagnosed. When your parents were your age, we did not have a good understanding of ADHD and doctors were not very good at diagnosing it. Many people who are now adults were not diagnosed as children. This is why it may look like more and more people now have ADHD, but it may be that we are just better at recognizing it and picking up less severe presentations.

We are also now better at recognizing ADHD in those without the hyperactivity. Many women who may not have been diagnosed with ADHD as girls, since girls often do not have the hyperactive component that makes ADHD easier to recognize, are diagnosed as adults. In children, three times as many boys as girls are diagnosed, but as adults the numbers are more equal. This leads us to think that we may not be diagnosing many of the girls who have ADHD when they are younger. Males may also have the primarily inattentive presentation of ADHD and are then also less likely to be diagnosed.

How is ADHD Treated?

Step One – Education

The treatment of ADHD should always be multimodal, or use a variety of treatments. However, the first step should always include becoming educated about ADHD and how it impacts you specifically.

Your parents and other family members should also educate themselves about ADHD. The more everyone understands ADHD, the better chance you and your family have of solving any problems that may occur at home, in school or within your family's relationships.

Step Two – School Accommodations

Your school should be informed about your ADHD so they can help implement strategies to help you become more successful at school. Being labelled as having a disability may not sound like fun, but we all have things that we are not good at, and getting help to overcome our difficulties is far better than being labelled lazy and unmotivated.

Classroom accommodations, simple changes that make school less frustrating can be out in place. One of the many accommodations that you may receive is extended time for tests and assignments. Because we know that it may take you longer to process information and get it down on paper, it may take you longer to produce reports or write tests. This has absolutely nothing to do with your intelligence or IQ. ADHD does not impact intelligence. There are many people who have ADHD that are very bright and even gifted. If you are given enough time to complete your work you can show people how much you actually do know.

Getting to use a computer or laptop to take notes, or being able to photocopy other students' or the teacher's notes, may be helpful. Many ADHD students find it hard to listen and pay attention while having to take notes.

Having assignments written down for you instead of just hearing them is great for all students, but especially good for those with ADHD. If you missed part of the instructions, or are not sure about specific details of the assignment, they are there for you to refer back to. It will also help your tutor or parents figure out what needs to be done.

You do not need to feel bad about being allowed to do things differently from other teens. You are not receiving special treatment, you are just getting what you need to be able to be successful at school and get your work done. Just like some people need glasses to see better, or a hearing aid to hear better, you may need some of these strategies and accommodation to learn and work better.

Something else that may help while doing desk work in the classroom is being allowed to listen to music through headphones. This will shut out distracting noises around you and help you to stay focused. Being able to work in an alternate quiet spot can also be helpful.

There are many accommodations that can be put in place to make things easier at school. And when you get to college or university it is important to know that ADHD is recognized as a disability which will allow you to access accommodations there as well. For more information on this access [Getting Started, Information on Post-Secondary ADHD](#).

ADHD is not an excuse for behaving badly or not getting your work done, but it may help to explain why you are having these problems and how your doctors, parents, and teachers can help you overcome them.

Step Three – Medication

The third thing that may be a great help is medication. Not everyone with ADHD takes medication but medication has been shown to help with attention regulation, hyperactivity and impulsivity. No one wants to take medication, but medication can really help, especially when trying to stay focused in class. If you are having a difficult time staying focused in class, you are probably missing out on a great deal of important information. We can tell from testing that ADHD kids often have gaps in their learning and miss out on instructions. You may have to spend so much of your energy during the day trying to stay focused that you are exhausted by the end of the day and missing out on the fun stuff.

Some teens unconsciously use anxiety to try and control their attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. This causes them to be very tense and nervous. Some kids can't control these things even when they are trying their best and end up getting into trouble. Medication is something that can help you work on the skills that you need to improve. It is not magic and it won't cure your ADHD. It only helps to reduce your ADHD symptoms while it is in your system. Skills such as executive functioning may still be difficult even if you are taking medication, so accommodations and strategies will need to be put in place. This is one of the reasons why ADHD treatment should always be multimodal. You, your parents and you doctor will need to discuss how best to treat your ADHD, but there are now more options than ever to choose from.

There are two types of medication that are most commonly used for ADHD. The type used most often is known as stimulant medication. There are stimulant medications that last a short time (usually about three to four hours) called Ritalin and Dexedrine. Newer stimulant medications are available (that last eight to twelve hours) called Concerta, Adderall XR, Biphentin and Vyvanse. There are two other types of medication can be used for ADHD, Strattera and Intuniv. These are non-stimulant medications and can be used if you have problems with stimulant medication. There are also other medications that are not used for ADHD as often, but may also be of help.

All medications can have side effects, even those we access without prescriptions. Some of the medications used for ADHD may have short-term side effects that go away after taking them for a while. Other side effects like decreased appetite, if not severe, can be dealt with by using special strategies. It is especially important to speak with your parents and your doctor if you are feeling agitated, depressed or just strange. Many people who take ADHD have very few or no side effects. There are more choices in medication these days and your doctor will work with you to find the right medication and the correct dose that works the best for you, with the least amount of side effects.

Other Treatments that Might be Helpful

Recent research has shown us that some additional treatments such as ADHD Coaching, Mindfulness and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) may also be helpful. Most of these treatments are more effective in adults than children, but you may now be old enough to find them helpful. To access more information on these treatments as well as information on healthy ADHD lifestyle choices access [Adult Treatment](#).

How Can I Help With My Treatment?

The very best way to help with your treatment is to learn about ADHD. When you understand what ADHD is and how it impacts you, you can start to learn strategies to help deal with it. ADHD affects everyone differently and it is important to understand not only the things that may be causing you problems but also the things that you are good at. ADHD is something that causes weaknesses in specific areas, but everyone has weaknesses in one area or another. Everyone also has strengths and it is important to use your strengths and assets to learn strategies and coping skills to deal with problems that arise due to your ADHD.

Remember, many of your strengths may be a result of your ADHD and not all your problems are caused by your ADHD. There are many successful adults with ADHD who attribute their success directly to their high energy level and their innovative way of thinking. Some people find the skill to be able to over-focus very valuable in their job. Many people with ADHD are very creative and good at thinking outside of the box. Everyone is suited to a different type of career and this is especially true for people with ADHD.

There are many successful people who have ADHD. When we asked these people what helped them to succeed, many reported that getting into a field or a job that they found interesting and stimulating made all the difference. People with ADHD find spending time doing things they find boring very difficult, but time seems to fly for them when they are interested in what they are doing. Unfortunately, you may need to spend some time doing those boring things to get to do the exciting stuff in the end.

You can also help with your treatment by trying to keep an open mind. Some of the things that people may be suggesting to you may sound strange and may seem like they will never work, but sometimes trying different, is the only way you can really find out what works for you. You may also need to practice things for a longer time than others, but if you stick with it, you'll master it in the end.

What about School, My Job and Friends?

You may feel that you don't want anyone at school, or at work to know you have ADHD. This is not uncommon. We don't like others knowing we have problems or things we find difficult. As you get older, and meet more people, you will find that everyone has things that they are good at and things that they find difficult.

Your school definitely needs to know about your ADHD or else they will not be able to help by providing accommodations for you. They will also be more likely to understand why you might be having problems with getting your work in on time, forgetting your work and belongings at home or at school, acting or speaking impulsively, not being able to focus in class and needing extra time to do tests and assignments.

Your friends already like you for being you. ADHD is a part of you. They probably like you for some of the things that may go along with ADHD - like your high energy level, your spontaneity, your creativeness, and your sense of humor. They won't stop liking you if they are your friends. In fact, if you can help them to understand you better, your relationship may even improve.

Will ADHD Ever Go Away?

ADHD is something that in most cases will continue into adulthood to some degree. You may see a change in some of your symptoms, like a decrease in your hyperactivity, but we know that at least two thirds of adults who had ADHD in childhood retain their core ADHD symptoms. The good news is that by taking advantage of treatment available, you will be able to learn strategies to help you work with your ADHD. Many people with ADHD grow up to have successful careers and happy lives, and there is no reason why this won't happen for you. The important thing is to work with your medical professionals to find the best treatment for your ADHD and stick with it. Learn as much as you can about yourself, your ADHD, your strengths and weaknesses and then put the tools in place to help that you need to be successful. Don't use your ADHD as an excuse or a reason to stop from reaching your dreams.