

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

A fact sheet produced by the Mental Health Information Service

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a condition that affects children, adolescents and adults. It is possible to have Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) without the hyperactivity. Generally it is marked by an inability to concentrate on tasks for an extended period of time, restlessness and complaints of boredom. Most people can develop strategies to counter the disorder and live a normal life; there is no reason for someone with ADHD to have a lower quality life.

SYMPTOMS

There are some classic symptoms that parents should keep an eye out for in their children. Keep in mind that many of these 'symptoms' are normal behaviour for pre school children. They are as follows:

- Inattention – may have difficulty keeping their mind on one thing
- Hyperactivity – people with ADHD seem always to be in motion. Have difficulty sitting still, talk incessantly, squirm, and essentially be extremely restless.
- Impulsivity – they seem unable to curb their initial reactions, not thinking before they act. Blurt out answers to questions, run onto the street without looking
- These behaviours are causing the child problems at home, school, with their friends and their general daily living
- Normal or high IQ, yet unsuccessful at school or work

The symptoms are slightly different for adults, as they have compensated for the associated problems. Adults may:

- Harbour feelings of low self worth
- Get bored with repetitive tasks
- Have trouble planning and organising
- Procrastinate
- Experience quick mood swings

HOW IS IT DIAGNOSED AND TREATED?

The first point of contact for anyone suspected of having ADHD is his or her local GP. Doctors can diagnose and treat ADHD, or can refer you to others specialising in the area. Diagnosis is based on history and observable behaviours in the child's usual settings. A developmental assessment is conducted to ensure that the cause is not biological (eg. hearing). Interviews with the person involved as well as those around them (eg parents, friends) can also aid an assessment.

In some cases, a change in diet (eg. reduce sugar intake) can minimize the symptoms of ADHD, however this does not work for everyone and is unproven by the scientific community. Behavioural treatments including psychotherapy, cognitive behavioural therapy, social skills training and support groups can be used. Medications are the most widely used form of treatment for ADHD. Psycho stimulant medications (eg. Ritalin) and amphetamines (eg. Dexedrine) are proven to be safe and effective ways to alleviate the symptoms of ADHD, with minimal side effects. The best management of ADHD is often a combination of behavioural treatments and medication after a

thorough professional assessment. For more information on medications contact your local GP or the pharmaceutical company that makes the drug.

WAYS TO HELP

Having ADHD doesn't mean a restriction in the quality of life. Below are some ideas that you can try to help the person with ADHD better adjust, most are aimed at children, but can be applied to adults as well:

- Make routines and stick to them
- Keep an eye out for things that could cause undue stress to the person
- For a child, try to avoid taking them into difficult situations eg. Parties, shopping centres
- Allow time to relax after activities
- Use appropriate terminology (eg. "Would you like to do A or B" rather than "what do you want to do")
- Use work areas that are uncluttered and quiet
- Maintain eye contact
- Keep instructions short
- Encourage them to do things they enjoy and do well
- Support and reassure them
- Teach them about the nature of friendships

While ADHD can be a burden for some, it can also be a gift. If it were an entirely negative trait then it would have died out thousands of years ago. Individuals with ADHD are often energetic, creative and willing to take risks. Often this gift comes into focus after the individual acquires a degree of self-knowledge and learns to channel their energy and creativity. Most people go through this process during adolescence, so by adulthood they can deal with the symptoms of ADHD.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- Hyperactivity Attention Deficit Association on NSW of 02 9411 2186
- Contact your local GP
- Contact your local health centre (see under 'Community Health Centre' in the White Pages)
- Mental Health Association NSW Inc on 02 9816 1611 or 1800 674 200 (Outside Sydney Metro)

Sources

ADHD Hyperactivity Attention Deficit Association of NSW

Adult Attention Deficit Disorder: Diagnosis, Coping and Mastery www.ncpamd.com

Attention Deficit Disorder Parenting SA www.parenting.sa.gov.au

ADHD – Q & A National Institute of Mental Health www.nimh.gov

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