

About ADHD

ADHD—Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder—is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects executive functions. In other words, the brain develops differently and these differences affect how well the person can make and follow plans, control their behaviour, and focus on the things they want or need to focus on.

This means that a lot of the time, people who have ADHD (ADHDers) get in trouble with authority figures for doing or saying the wrong thing, not doing or saying the right thing, or doing or saying the right thing at the wrong time.

There are three types of ADHD: ADHD-Primarily Inattentive Type (ADHD-PI); ADHD-Primarily Hyperactive/Impulsive Type (ADHD-PH); and ADHD-Combined Type (ADHD-C). Diagnosis is based on how many criteria for each type are present. In addition, since ADHD is developmental, symptoms do need to be present prior to age 12; you don't suddenly get ADHD as an adult.

However, a lot of people—especially those who have ADHD-PI—don't get diagnosed as children. This can be for a lot of reasons, but often it's because the adults in their lives just didn't recognize it. ADHD is highly heritable, which means that it's very common for multiple members of a family to either have ADHD or display traits of ADHD. (This also happens with autism, and ADHD and autism are often both found in the same family.) Since the adults think the ADHD-related traits are normal behaviours because they're things they did as kids (or do as adults), they don't realize that their children have any real difficulties. A lot of parents don't even consider the possibility that they might have ADHD until their kids are diagnosed.

The first line of treatment is medication. ADHD is thought to be related to a lack of dopamine in the brain, which can be caused by either a lack of dopamine production or inefficient dopamine use. There are a few types of medication options. Stimulants affect dopamine, while non-stimulants usually affect norepinephrine or epinephrine. One other type of non-stimulant helps with emotional control. ADHDers can also be prescribed antianxiety meds or antidepressants, particularly because both anxiety disorders and depression can be comorbid with ADHD (happen at the same time). There are always side effects with medication, and it can take time to find one that both helps with symptoms and has side effects you can live with. Adults and professionals need to be sure to take the time to listen to children about how they're feeling after taking their medication. Nobody should have to live with horrible side effects.

A lot of people like to try other things before turning to medication. This is a personal decision and it's important to make these choices in consultation with a doctor. Options include talk therapy (particularly Cognitive Behavioural Therapy—CBT), ADHD coaching, supplements, and neurofeedback. There are lots of other possibilities as well, but be careful of people who are peddling “the answer” because there is no quick “cure” for ADHD, just things that help with managing symptoms.



Speaking of managing symptoms, it's important to remember that a lot of ADHD-related issues aren't directly under control of the ADHDer. This means that punishing someone for those kinds of things is unfair and abusive, as is instituting behaviour charts and rewards and token economies. It's far better to work on implementing strategies that help people manage their symptoms and find ways to set them up for success. Positive approaches like this help develop responsibility and accountability, and they help to build and maintain self-esteem.

The most important things for ADHDers are sleep, diet, exercise, and stress. Even with treatment and strategies, if one of these four things is out of whack, ADHD symptoms will be harder to manage. Check the current recommendations for sleep based on age, but remember that being in bed, resting, counts as part of the time you need to sleep for. As for diet, whatever is a healthy diet for you is great, whether you are vegetarian, vegan, or omnivorous, but more protein is better than more carbs for long-term energy, while carbs will provide your brain with instant dopamine and energy if you need a boost. (This is why a lot of ADHDers have weight problems; they tend to self-medicate with food, especially candy and other junk food.) Regular exercise, particularly cardio, is important for brain function. Physical activity is also a great way to reset your brain if you're having trouble focusing on something. Finally, the less stressful your life is, the better. Having ADHD is automatically stressful, which is why the other things are so important, and why treatment and strategies are vital.

It is possible to have a good life with ADHD, it's just not very easy or simple.