

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, is one of the most common mental disorders to develop in children. Millions of children in the U.S. suffer with the condition. Children with ADHD have impaired functioning in multiple settings, including home, school, and in relationships with peers. If untreated, the disorder can have long-term adverse effects into adolescence and adulthood.

ADHD is common in children, and it appears more often in boys than girls. Researchers think biology plays a large role in causing this disorder.

Prevalence and causes

The exact cause of ADHD remains unknown, although studies of people with ADHD have shown differences in brain structure and activity. The disorder may affect the “executive functions” of the brain that control organization and direction of thought and behavior. Regardless of the disorder’s cause, its presence is no fault of the child or family.

Signs and symptoms

Although most people with ADHD want to control their behavior, they struggle to do so. Symptoms of ADHD often appear over the course of many months, and can include:

- **Impulsiveness:** a child who acts quickly without thinking first.
- **Hyperactivity:** a child who can’t sit still, walks, runs, or climbs around when others are seated, talks when others are talking.

- **Inattention:** a child who daydreams or seems to be in another world, is sidetracked by what is going on around him or her.

Types of ADHD

Clinicians have identified three types of ADHD: hyperactive-impulsive, inattentive and mixed. Symptoms vary depending on which type the child experiences. Some children with ADHD are overactive and impulsive, and have short attention spans. Others are quiet and inattentive, and unable to focus well. This type of ADHD can be more difficult to diagnose.

An accurate diagnosis is key

If ADHD is suspected, a screening diagnosis should be made by a professional with training in ADHD. This can include child psychiatrists, psychologists, developmental/behavioral pediatricians, behavioral neurologists, and clinical social workers. After ruling out other possible reasons for the child’s behavior, the specialist checks the child’s school and medical records and talks to teachers and parents who



Of those diagnosed with ADHD, 30 to 40 percent have relatives with the same disorder.¹

have filled out a behavior rating scale for the child. A diagnosis is made only after all this information has been considered. Spotting the disorder early and setting up a plan of care can help children do better at home and at school.

Treatment

Effective treatments for ADHD are available, including medications and behavioral therapy. These can be provided in combination. Without proper care, children with ADHD often suffer in school and can have behavioral and emotional problems through adulthood. Treatment can help children function better in daily situations.

- **Medication**—Research shows that treatment with drugs such as stimulants or antidepressants will help most children with ADHD. Stimulants appear to boost and balance levels of brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. This can reduce impulsive behavior, and also lessen hyperactive or aggressive behavior. However, use of medications requires careful, ongoing medical monitoring. Though the side effects affecting children can include reduced appetite, weight loss and sleep problems, many doctors think the benefits of the medicines are worth the side effects. Side effects can often be lessened by reducing dosage amounts.

- **Behavioral therapy**—Children benefit from receiving counseling provided by mental health professionals who specialize in treating children. A provider can work with the family to establish a plan of care designed to help the child attain improved functioning in all areas of life including home, school and the community. In addition, parenting skills training and family therapy can help everyone adapt to living with a person who has ADHD.

ADHD and the family

It's a challenge to the whole family when a child has ADHD. Other family members often face stress and frustration. Relationships between spouses can become strained. Siblings may feel left out if the family seems to focus on the child with ADHD. Everyone can feel overwhelmed at times. The following tips can help you and your family better manage ADHD. Praise your child for every success, no matter how small. Remember to do so for other siblings, too.

- Help your child stay on a regular daily schedule for meals, naps and bedtime.
- Try to make sure your child gets plenty of rest.
- Even if a child seems out of control, try to stay patient and calm. This can help the child calm down.

1. *Mental Health America* www.mentalhealthamerica.net



- Look ahead and plan for difficult situations. Give clear, basic instructions when it's time to move from one thing to the next.
- To defuse or redirect a child's behavior, use brief timeouts from the current activity.
- Help him or her to become more organized with schoolwork at home. Maintain a neat workspace that is free of distractions.
- Work as closely as possible with your child's teachers. Know what classroom strategies they're using to help the child.
- Take breaks to cut down on stress, and don't hesitate to ask for help sometimes.
- Set aside time for your relationship with your parental partner.

ADHD and school

As the number of children diagnosed with ADHD increases, teachers have learned how to better support the educational needs of such children. You and your child's teacher should discuss the child's needs as soon as possible. Then check in often to monitor progress. Public schools are required by law to provide special help for children with learning disabilities like ADHD. The following strategies have proven effective for many children with ADHD:

- Teaching parents and teachers how to work with children suffering with ADHD; this can include rewarding good behavior

- A report card to connect home and school every day
- Summer and Saturday programs
- Classrooms that use behavior modification
- Specially trained classroom tutors or aids.

Access helpful resources

Joining a support group can help you learn from people going through similar challenges. Local support is available through Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (CHADD). (Visit their website: www.chadd.org.) Your family doctor may also know of local support groups. You can also find many helpful books and guides to ADHD online. Plus, your program is also available to provide ADHD tools and resources.

This document is for your information only. It is not meant to give medical advice. It should not be used to replace a visit with a provider. Magellan does not endorse other resources that may be mentioned here.