

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder
Information for young people, parents,
carers and educational staff

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol

ADHD in children and young people



Ymchwil Iechyd
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Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that is mainly diagnosed in childhood, though sometimes it is not recognised until adulthood.

When diagnosed in childhood, ADHD often persists into adolescence and adulthood and has lifelong impacts.

ADHD is characterised by difficulties with hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention.

Hyperactivity can include being unable to sit still, fidgeting, or finding it difficult to participate in activities quietly.

Sometimes, people with ADHD can appear to be 'on the go' or act as if 'driven by a motor'. Impulsivity can include interrupting (for example, butting into conversations), having difficulty waiting one's turn, or talking excessively.

Attention-related symptoms can include finding it difficult to pay close attention to details, being

easily distracted, being unable to remain focused on a specific task, or having problems following instructions or organising activities.

Many of us have these characteristics to some extent (we can all be impatient, over-enthusiastic, or find it difficult to focus).

For a health professional to make a diagnosis of ADHD, these symptoms must be severe, persistent and cause difficulties for the individual across different areas of their lives (at home, at school and in their interactions with other people).

Symptoms of ADHD are typically present across different settings.

However, the extent of difficulties will vary according to the environment. For example, everyday environments like schools can pose challenges for children and young people with ADHD, if the environment is not properly adjusted.

Although ADHD is more likely to be diagnosed in boys compared to girls, ADHD can affect children and young people regardless of their gender.

Childhood to adulthood

ADHD symptoms typically start in early childhood but are not always recognised and diagnosed at this age.

For some people, symptoms reduce or are less obvious by adolescence, but for others, the symptoms and their impact continue into adulthood.

It is possible that symptoms can have a greater impact in adolescence and adulthood, when young people are expected to be more independent and demands start to increase.

Alternatively, ADHD might become easier to manage in adulthood, when people are more able to choose roles and environments which suit their strengths and interests.

With the right support, people with ADHD can live successful and fulfilling lives.



A complex neurodevelopmental condition

ADHD is a complex neurodevelopmental condition, which impacts on the brain and nervous system as it matures. It can affect the way people learn, experience, interact with, and understand the world and it can affect people in different ways.

Hyperactivity, impulsivity and attention

While most children and young people with ADHD will have difficulties with hyperactivity, impulsivity, and attention, some may have problems mostly with attention or mostly with hyperactivity and impulsivity.

ADHD affects some children and young people to a greater extent than others, and other neurodevelopmental problems can occur alongside ADHD such as autism, tics, developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia) and specific learning difficulties such as with reading (dyslexia).

Regulating emotions

Many children and young people with ADHD also have difficulties

with regulating their emotions (for example being irritable or getting angry easily).

They might find everyday environments emotionally challenging in ways that may be hard for others to understand. They are also more likely than their peers to be exposed to more emotionally difficult experiences such as being bullied.

Behavioural problems

Some children and young people experience behavioural problems like conduct and anti-social behaviours which means they often break rules and get in trouble with their parents or authorities at school or in the community.

Mental health problems

Some may also experience emotional problems such as anxiety or depression, or other mental health problems like eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder, or substance use.

Getting help

If parents or carers become concerned about a child or young person, their GP will be able to offer advice and may be able to refer the child or young person to a specialist.

School staff may also raise concerns and may be able to refer them to a specialist or suggest visiting the GP.

An ADHD diagnosis

Getting a diagnosis of ADHD requires a full and detailed assessment usually by either a specialist paediatrician or a child and adolescent psychiatrist. Unfortunately, there is no quick and easy test for ADHD.

Assessments typically gather information from several different sources and may include observations and reports of the child or young person's behaviour at home and school.

Managing ADHD

There are several different approaches to helping people with ADHD, which can be effective in managing the condition.

Following an ADHD diagnosis, UK guidelines indicate that children and young people and their families or carers should be given information about ADHD. Support can include environmental changes, medication, or psychological therapies.

Environment changes

Environmental changes to minimise the impact of ADHD on day-to-day life are usually recommended.

These may include small changes at school, such as:

- moving children and young people with ADHD to the front of the class to minimise distractions and help them to focus better
- providing frequent movement breaks
- breaking school tasks into smaller sections and using praise after each section.

At home, parents and carers can adopt different ways of supporting the needs of children and young people with ADHD, such as adjusting the home environment and routines to work with a child or young person's unique strengths and challenges.

Psychological therapies and training

Children and young people and their parents or carers may be offered:

- psycho-education (learning more about ADHD and how to manage it)
- parent training sessions to help manage difficulties
- skills-based training for children and young people
- talking therapies like cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Medication

If a child or young person is still experiencing significant difficulties related to their ADHD after changes have been made, then medication may be offered.

Common medications used to treat the condition include Methylphenidate (Ritalin, Equasym, Concerta), Lisdexamfetamine, Atomoxetine (Strattera), and Guanfacine.

The most used medications generally start to work shortly after each dose, and do not have a long-lasting effect. They can be very effective, but as with all medication, there is a chance of side effects. A prescribing doctor will advise on these issues.

Not all children and young people with ADHD will need medication, while those taking medication may also need educational or psychological treatment.

Some children will take medications every day. Others might, for example, take these only on school days if school is the main environment which continues to be challenging.



Tips for children and young people with ADHD

- Try to treat yourself with kindness.
- Try and think of some of the positive aspects about who you are and write them down so you can refer to them when you need to.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Try to find a trusted adult at school and/or at home who you can reach out to when you need extra support. If you need an adjustment (e.g., if a teacher only gives instructions verbally, you can ask that they give you a written version).
- Remember that there is a lot of misinformation about ADHD among people, even from some adults.

People with ADHD can achieve anything that someone without ADHD can, they might just take a different route than others. So don't let anyone tell you otherwise!

- Building friendships with other children and young people with ADHD, or related conditions like autism, can sometimes be easier than building friendships with 'neurotypical' people without ADHD or other 'neurodivergent' conditions. You may find you are able to understand each other better as your brains may work in a similar way.
- Remember that ADHD is a condition that you can try to manage, but you might not always be able to control. Doing your best is what counts, and understanding that everyone has bad days, even adults with ADHD.



Tasks that need a lot of concentration, like homework, can be especially difficult for children and young people with ADHD.

Here a few ideas that might help:

- Keep a homework diary and write down everything you need to do. It might help to ask your teacher to check your diary to make sure you have all the information you need. Remember to take your homework diary home with you.
- Find a quiet place to do your homework with few distractions.
- Get everything you need ready before you start. It might help to keep all your stationery and books in one specific place.
- Take time to read instructions carefully so you know what to do before you start. Check the instructions again as you start to make sure you know exactly what to do.
- Break long tasks into smaller sections.
- Take short breaks every 20 minutes or so to give your brain a rest.



Tips for parents, carers and staff supporting children and young people with ADHD

- Remember that children and young people with ADHD are not being wilful or deliberately difficult. Try to keep in mind that ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition, and difficulties are part of it.
- Use rewards and discipline – reward charts for positive behaviour and effective, consistent discipline for difficult behaviour can help support a child or young person.
- Learning about ADHD and understanding why a child or young person reacts to things in ways you might not expect, can help you learn to respond to this in ways that minimise conflict.
- Keep instructions simple and consistent – children and young people with ADHD can find it difficult to process many things at the same time. Try to break up long strings of instructions into one instruction at a time.
- Praise children and young people with ADHD when they do well and look for their strengths – it will boost their self-confidence and make you feel better. Children and young people with ADHD will often receive a lot of criticism from others. Try to make sure that you make positive comments more often than critical or corrective comments.
- Write things down and use visual reminders. Stress the importance of writing down homework tasks – and bringing homework books home too. It will make it much easier to keep on top of tasks and what is required.

- Try to keep things consistent and have a routine. If everything has its place and a child or young person is encouraged to use that place, it will be easier for them to remember where things are and be more organised.
- Adapt your expectations and family or classroom routines to accommodate a child or young person's needs.
- Get support – many parents, children and young people find it helpful to join local or online support groups where you can discuss issues with others. Remember to only follow medical advice from a healthcare professional.
- ADHD is largely genetic, and many parents find that they recognise traits in themselves after their child receives a diagnosis. If this happens, this doesn't necessarily mean you have ADHD yourself, but if you are concerned, you can seek advice by speaking to your GP.



Useful websites

NCMH

Our website has a dedicated ADHD section, including details on research, suggested reading and links to medication information.

ncmh.info/adhd

Royal College of Psychiatrists

This site provides a detailed patient information leaflet about ADHD in several languages as well as other mental health information. Search 'ADHD' from the homepage.

rcpsych.ac.uk

NHS Choices

A comprehensive guide to ADHD from the NHS. Search 'ADHD' from the homepage.

nhs.uk

Wolfson Centre for Young People's Mental Health

Our colleagues at the Wolfson Centre have produced an information booklet about ADHD aimed at young people, created in partnership with members of the centre's youth advisory board.

cardiff.ac.uk



Join our NCMH research community

Join our research community today and help us better understand conditions like ADHD. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support for people in the future.

Joining our community is easy - it involves completing an online sign-up form which takes about 15 minutes and will ask you about:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To join, visit: ncmh.info/join

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Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni.

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