

What is ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)?

- A deficiency in neurotransmitters (e.g. norepinephrine, serotonin, dopamine) affecting communication between the frontal cortex and other areas of the brain.
- Probably hereditary

What it is not

- A deficit of attention – more a reduced ability to filter or control it
- A mental illness
- A character deficit, a lack of willpower, or laziness
- A lack of skills or knowledge

Three types of ADHD

- Inattentive
- Hyperactive and impulsive
- Combined

Symptoms can present differently in girls, and may be less noticeable to others. They can include hair twiddling, biting nails, picking skin, headaches, stomach-aches, anxiety. Changes in oestrogen (such as the onset of puberty, monthly fluctuations during the menstrual cycle, pregnancy, menopause) is becoming recognised as a trigger for symptoms in girls and women. In adults, hyperactivity can present as an inability to relax or unwind, or a racing mind. Impulsivity could be impulse shopping, or risky and dangerous behaviours.

ADHD can be associated with learning difficulties, but people may also be gifted. High ability can mask symptoms as people are seen to be achieving, but perhaps not “as well as they could”. It’s often associated with anxiety and/or depression.

What it looks like

- **Difficulties with tasks requiring executive functions**

Executive functions are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully and include things like organising, planning, time-management, working memory, starting and finishing tasks.

NB everyone struggles with these things sometimes; not everyone has ADHD.

- **Sensory difficulties**

Difficulties processing sensory stimuli can create a feeling of overload, being overstimulated by competing stimuli (sounds, smells, textures etc). Feeling overstimulated creates stress, anxiety and an urge to withdraw. However, insufficient sensory input and reduced levels of dopamine create feelings of being understimulated, disengaged and unmotivated. The urge to seek stimulation can lead to dangerous or unhealthy behaviour.

- **Motor difficulties**

The ADHD brain processes fractionally slower than a neurotypical brain because of the transportation difficulties with neurotransmitters and also because of the increase in slow wave (theta wave) movement. Researchers have found about half of all children with developmental gross motor coordination disorders actually suffer from varying degrees of ADHD. Team sports, which involve pressure to perform simultaneously with motor control and maintaining attention, may be particularly challenging. Handwriting may be poor.

- **Emotional dysregulation**

An inability to regulate or process emotions in a controlled way, being easily angered, quick to over-react, but also becoming overly excited.

Rejection Sensitivity Dysphoria is common, an extreme and painful sensitivity to perceived rejection or criticism which can also be triggered by a sense of falling short, failing to meet standards and expectations (one's own, others, or perceived). Up to 99% of teens and adults with ADHD are more sensitive than usual to rejection; nearly 1 in 3 say it's the hardest part of living with ADHD.

- **Anxiety, shame, depression**

Forgetfulness, commonly misunderstood by others as selfishness or not caring, together with perceived or actual judgement for failing to consistently meet the "norm" leads to shame and anxiety. This is exacerbated for women due to a societal expectation to be able to juggle work, family, and household tasks.

- **Hyperfocus**

Dysregulation of attention enables the ADHD brain to become engaged in an activity at the expense of everything else. Work can be completed in marathon sessions, with no awareness of time, or breaks to eat or sleep. The result may be an outward appearance of coping and achieving, but can lead to exhaustion and burnout.

- **Clutter and apparent disorganisation**

Heaps of papers and possessions can represent thinking in visual form. Out of sight is literally out of mind, so items cannot be tidied until the task is complete. Impulsivity and inattention can lead to many tasks being in progress or abandoned at any one time.

- **Financial difficulties**

Forgetfulness and inattentiveness, time-blindness, clutter/disorganisation and impulsive behaviour, can create financial difficulties.

Treatment

- **Medication**

Stimulants or anti-depressants such as SNRIs (Serotonin and norepinephrine reuptake inhibitors)

- **Non-pharmacological**

Behavioural, psychological, social, educational and lifestyle interventions e.g. CBT, coaching, mindfulness, exercise, diet, sleep.

Using external resources

Planners, timetables, clocks, alarms, and reminders help to make time and commitments visible. Writing and talking aloud help to organise thoughts.

Modifying the environment

Clearing away distractions reduces reliance on self-regulation and impulse control. Noise-reducing headphones or white noise aid focus and prevent overstimulation.

Exercise, sleep and regular meals help ease stress and anxiety and improve executive functions such as working memory and impulse control.

Challenge

Research suggests attention performance may improve with increasing cognitive load. When task demands are low, there are more problems with filtering attention. A measure of challenge or difficulty helps to capture focus. American psychiatrist and ADHD expert Ned Hallowell recommends finding “the right difficult”: a creative outlet to engage and challenge the creative part of the mind.

Education

Understanding the condition is essential: to manage ADHD symptoms, and support those with ADHD. It’s also critical in reducing feelings of shame, inadequacy and anxiety.

ADHD does not disappear in adulthood, although symptoms can reduce. This may be due to a lifetime’s experience of creating strategies and workarounds, and adapting to the condition, consciously or not.

Diagnosis

In England, ADHD assessment is available under the NHS “right to choose” after referral by a GP. After diagnosis, appropriate treatment is suggested and can be arranged, but further fees are not covered under the NHS and usual prescription charges apply for any medications. Wait time from referral to assessment and diagnosis can be between six months and a year. It is possible to pay for a private assessment.

Useful resources

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/>

<https://psychiatry-uk.com/right-to-choose/>

<https://adhduk.co.uk/>

<https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/resources/>

<https://www.additudemag.com/>

<https://www.additudemag.com/quiz/adhd-in-women-symptom-test/>

<https://www.additudemag.com/quiz/adhd-symptoms-test-adults/>

and for fun...

<https://romankogan.net/adhd/>