



## **ATTENTION DEFICIT DISORDER**

Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) / Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), is a treatable disorder that affects approximately three to five percent of the population. Children begin to show signs of the problem early in childhood, often by the age of three and even in infancy. It is generally more common in boys although girls with ADD may be overlooked because of cultural stereotypes and a tendency to be less hyperactive.

### **Common Symptoms of ADD Include:**

1. Excessively fidgets or squirms
2. Difficulty remaining seated
3. Easily distracted
4. Difficulty awaiting turn in games
5. Blurts out answers to questions
6. Difficulty following instructions, e.g., fails to finish chores
7. Difficulty sustaining attention
8. Shifts from one activity to another
9. Difficulty playing quietly
10. Often talks excessively
11. Often interrupts
12. Often does not listen to what is said
13. Often loses things
14. Often engages in dangerous activities without considering possible consequences

These symptoms are often first recognized when the child starts school and concentration is required for success. Usually these symptoms--short attention span, disorganization, impulsiveness, distractibility and hyperactivity--come to the attention of an elementary teacher. As can be seen from the above list, the majority of the symptoms do not involve hyperactivity. Therefore, a child may be diagnosed with ADD but not have hyperactivity.

The exact cause of ADD is unknown. Research seems to suggest that ADD is a chemical brain disorder that is genetically based. Many times parents can identify another family member with similar problems. It is safe to say that ADD is not caused by a faulty diet, preservatives in food, visual disorders, schizophrenia, childhood head injuries, inadequately trained teachers, air pollution, or poor parenting. There is no clear-cut evidence that eliminating refined sugars from the diet produces long-term positive effects. However, too many refined sugars or food additives are not good for anyone.

**How is ADD diagnosed?** Doctors have a set of diagnostic criteria that help them decide if an individual has ADD. There are no blood tests or psychological tests that make a definite diagnosis of ADD. There are three major features--inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity--and certain hallmarks further define each of these areas. Additional data may be needed from teachers as well as other adults who may interact on a routine basis with the individual being evaluated.

**What are the treatments?** ADD is not a problem that can be "cured". Certain types of medications have a beneficial effect on the ADD symptoms so they can, therefore, be treated and controlled. These medications, when monitored, have been shown to have a low risk for dependency or addiction. Stimulant medications, such as Ritalin®, have been used for the management of ADD symptoms for more than 50 years. At least 70-80% of children and adults with ADD respond positively to psychostimulant medication. The behavioral changes that occur when medication is administered include increased alertness and ability to sharply focus, an increased attention span and improved ability to filter out distractions, and a reduction of impulsivity. The exact way these behavioral changes occur is unclear. Ritalin®, one of the most common medications used in ADD, has a chemical structure that is similar to that of the neurotransmitters that operate in the attention centers of the brain. This suggests that, in some way, Ritalin "corrects" the neurochemical difference that is presumed to be the basis for ADD.

**Along with the desired effects, psychostimulants may cause some unwanted side effects.** Be sure to check with your health care provider if these or any other side effects should occur: most common-nervousness, insomnia, or loss of appetite.



Less common-skin rash, nausea, dizziness, headache, weight loss, and change in blood pressure. *Contact your health care provider immediately if the individual experiences delirium, confusion, difficulty breathing, tremors, sweating, vomiting, or muscle twitching. These may be signs that his/her dose is too high.*

In addition to drug therapy, behavioral therapy and counseling are important adjuncts. This involves helping the individual to become more aware of his problem, to learn strategies for controlling and compensating for inattention, and to develop techniques for improved life problem-solving. It is also important to help parents, teachers, and others to understand and accept the problem, set realistic expectations, and effectively manage difficult behavior.

All individuals with ADD need to participate in regular follow-up visits. These visits are essential in order to coordinate various treatments, to monitor progress and to assist the individual and his family in accepting the chronic nature of ADD.

**How can parents help the problem?** Use good parenting skills such as setting reasonable limits and rules of behavior and knowing how to stick to them.

Key words are consistent, firm, explicit, and predictable. You must keep rules consistent in that they should not change from day to day. You must also be firm in enforcing the rules, and your child must understand exactly what will happen if he breaks the rules--that is, the consequences have to be completely predictable. Finally, the punishment must follow any breaking of the rules immediately and consistently.

Understand that in order to change a child's behavior, you have to praise and encourage the good behavior and discourage the bad. Such praise should not be general, "You're such a good boy," but specific. "I'm really proud that you didn't hit your sister when she teased you." Criticism also has to be specific. "I don't want you to hit your brother. It hurts him and makes him cry, and it makes me angry. Go to the time-out chair until you decide to play nicely."

Your praise, attention, and hugs or other signs of affection are often the best reward a child can have, and time-out is probably the most appropriate punishment. The time-out chair should be in a quiet, boring place to help your child settle. Use one minute of time-out per year of age of the child, or two minutes per year of age for more serious misbehavior.

Set aside a time each day to give all your attention to the child. Reading aloud and playing age-appropriate toys and games will help build memory and concentration span. Matching games are especially good for helping to build concentration skills.

Keep your child on a predictable daily schedule. Try to set specific times for wake-up, meals, snacks, chores, bath, TV and so on. This helps put some order in what he often feels is a chaotic world.

Have realistic expectations about your child's behavior. Don't put impossible demands on your child such as going to long religious services, eating in very formal restaurants, or attending formal, indoor concerts.

Instead, let him work off some energy by going to a park, running around, and riding a bike. When you want to eat out with him, go to a casual, child-friendly restaurant.

**How can parents help themselves?** A child who has ADD can cause considerable stress in the family setting. It is important for parents to try to relieve each other in assuming primary caretaking for the child from time to time. If one parent works and the other stays with the child all day long, for example, the one who goes out to work can give the other some free time during the evening. By sharing in the care of your child, you can start to solve problems together and be less likely to blame each other for the problems created by the disruptive behavior. It is important to try to arrange to spend time together, too. Try to find a trustworthy baby-sitter who will let you go out for an evening or even take a weekend away from home if possible.

Get in touch with the self-help organization, Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Disorders (CHADD). This organization sponsors local support groups, holds educational meetings, and publishes information about ADD. More information is available at: <http://www.CHADD.org>  
<http://www.ADD.org>