

Identifying Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder in Children

In this part of our series, we highlight one of the most common childhood disorders; Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In this bulletin, we provide information on early signs and other important information to help caregivers/parents understand the signs to look out for as this is the first step to early detection and seeking professional help.

What is Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder?

ADHD is a developmental disorder involving impulsivity, inattention and sometimes hyperactivity that is not age appropriate.

Impulsivity: acting without thinking

Inattention: Difficulties staying on a task

Hyperactivity: moving about constantly in situations that are inappropriate

Although, at some point, everyone is likely to have problems controlling impulsivity, paying attention etc. however, ADHD interferes with daily lives.

ADHD usually begins to occur at early childhood but becomes more distinguishable as a result of developmental changes, for example, when the child starts going to school. Some cases are diagnosed in childhood (3 to 7 years), while others get diagnosed later in adulthood.

How Could ADHD look like in children:

1. Inattention

- Trouble keeping focus
- Making careless mistakes
- Difficulty listening when spoken to directly
- Failure to follow through with instructions, not because of inability to understand instructions or oppositional behavior
- Difficulty organizing tasks
- Avoids or is reluctant to engage in tasks
- Easily distracted
- Often forgetful of routine activities
- Loses things, e.g., toys
- Difficulty accepting responsibility for action.
- The child's mind seems to wander even when being addressed.
- Difficulty sticking to activities
- They have trouble organizing tasks.
- Struggling with managing their time well
- They usually dislike or avoid tasks that need sustained mental effort

2. Hyperactivity/Impulsivity

- Difficulty sitting still, restlessness, high energy, excessive talking
- Excessive climbing and running
- Impulsivity, e.g., blurting out answers
- Difficulty engaging in play quietly
- Always on the go
- Excessive talking
- Interrupting or intruding on conversations
- little to no sense of danger and often puts themselves in risky situations.

Important to Note:

ADHD is only diagnosed if:

1. The behavior occurs more frequently in the child than in other children
2. One of the symptoms occur prior to age 7 years
3. The symptom must be present at least for 6 months
4. The symptom must have a negative impact on child's daily life
5. The symptom must be present in different settings

Types of ADHD

Hyperactive or Impulsive ADHD refers to the type where the child mostly exhibits symptoms of restlessness such as not being able to stay still and seated in calm occasions, for example, in a classroom or any such similar gatherings.

Inattentive ADHD, on the other hand, is the type where a child has problems maintaining focus on tasks or activities and fails to pay close attention to details.

As the name suggests, **Combined ADHD** exhibits a mixture of the symptoms of Inattentive ADHD and Impulsive ADHD.

Some children may have problems concentrating and maintaining attention but not with hyperactivity. This form of ADHD is called Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD). This disorder often goes undiagnosed because the symptoms are less noticeable.

Diagnosis of ADHD:

So how would you know whether your child has ADHD or not?

There is no particular laboratory test for ADHD, but there are signs and pointers that can help identify it.

Diagnosis involves gathering information from parents and caregivers, conducting medical tests to rule out any possible medical problems such as hearing or visual impairments or anxiety disorders, and finally assessing using the Diagnostic Statistical Manual. All this is done by clinical professionals, of course.

Important Note:

ADHD is more commonly diagnosed in boys than in girls. Boys are more likely to develop the hyperactive or impulsive type of ADHD as opposed to the Inattentive type displayed by girls. This makes ADHD easier and more common to diagnose in boys than girls.

When should a parent get worried and seek help?

- ✓ Some of the signs can be noticeable as early as **infancy**- symptoms such as delay in language, delay in motor function and temperamental characteristics
- ✓ During the **first 3 months**, children experiencing spontaneous motility or distinct spontaneous patterns of movement without experiencing any external stimulation are more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD later on. Such infants are observed to be more distractable, inattentive and restless.

- ✓ Sleeping and feeding difficulties by children below 6 months could also be signs correlating to ADHD. At 6 months, a child with difficulties sitting straight up when put on an adult's lap may also be at risk of developing ADHD.

- It is important to look out for missing or delayed fine and gross motor skills during a child's first year of life. Some researchers have proposed that increased activity during a child's infancy could be an indicator of ADHD.

(fine motor skills include grabbing an object, squeezing, feeding themselves using their hands, pointing and poking with their forefinger and scooping and pouring into a bowl, while gross motor skills include squatting to play, throwing objects, sitting by themselves, attempting to run etc.)

- ✓ Some toddlers (12 to 36 months) also experience difficulty in coordinating their gross and fine motor functions (such as sitting, crawling, jumping and running fairly well), and sequencing their movements (this is simply the pattern progression that leads to the execution of an action, e.g., what happens immediately before a child starts crawling and walking), language and speech deficit (your child should begin to develop language skills between 3 months to 2 years).
- ✓ The presence of any problem in motor skill development may be an indicator of ADHD or ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder).
The explanation is simply that delayed or negative motor function development could result from impulse control problems and inattention - which is a core marker of ADHD.
The neurobiological explanation is that delays in motor development and specific motor skills are associated with delays in brain maturation, especially in executive function and motor control among people with ADHD.
- ✓ Another thing to look out for is whether a child has balance problems and difficulties with postural control. These could be signs such as lacking head control, hypotonia (this is weakness in muscle tone/function) and difficulties sitting up straight. Such a child could also experience problems organizing and successfully executing the movement.
- ✓ Just before the school-going ages- the signs to look out for are difficult temperaments, language and motor delay. At 3-12 months, a child should begin to babble and make sounds, and by 12 months, they should start producing single words with meanings.
- ✓ By 18 months, the child is expected to be saying up to 10 words when speaking. If the child is not speaking by 2 years of age, you need to consult a child specialist.
- ✓ From about two and a half years, children with ADHD may also experience difficulties falling asleep at night, getting ready for school on time, accurately listening and carrying out instructions given, and having a hard time with social occasions.
- ✓ Symptoms of inattention noticeable in early to middle childhood(0 to 8 years) include; getting easily distracted by irrelevant stimuli, forgetfulness in routine activities such as homework and chores, failure to pay close attention to details resulting in careless

mistakes, losing objects required for tasks or activities, for example, school books, sports equipment, keys, failure to follow through tasks and chore to completion, problems paying attention in play, school or home activities and inability to listen even when directly addressed.

- ✓ Other symptoms to expect to include running around, climbing and jumping on everything, consistent restlessness and movement, talking nonstop, being unable to concentrate and listen for long periods, finding it hard to settle down and sit down for meals or having a hard time taking naps.
- ✓ Further testing should always be done by the professional to rule out other developmental disorders or physical conditions.

Causes of ADHD

Now, there's not been a specific cause identified by scientists yet, but there are certain factors that put a child at risk of ADHD, including:

➤ **Genetics**

Studies show that three out of four children with ADHD have someone in their family with the same disorder. This goes to show that ADHD can be passed through the family.

➤ **Circumstances surrounding the child's birth**

Children born prematurely (before 37 weeks) are also at risk of developing ADHD. Circumstances surrounding a child's birth, such as brain injury, low birth weight, abuse of drugs, or extreme stress during the mother's pregnancy, may also contribute to the development of ADHD.

➤ **History of mental disorders or seizure disorders, e.g., epilepsy**

Children with epilepsy are more prone to developing ADHD because of contributory factors such as early-onset or a sudden onset of epilepsy, a longer period of antiepileptic medication and frequent episodes of uncontrolled seizures. Additionally, male epileptic children have a higher prevalence of developing ADHD.

The prevalence of ADHD cases in children with epilepsy is higher compared to their general population counterparts. According to studies, about 30-60% of epileptic children also present with ADHD.

Diagnosing ADHD

A child to be diagnosed with ADHD must have experienced and shown symptoms of inattention, hyperactivity or impulsivity that began at least before the age of 12. They also need to exhibit these symptoms in more than 2 settings.

Before diagnosis, other similarly occurring conditions must have been ruled out such that any other disorder cannot better explain the presenting symptoms.

Treatment of ADHD

Treatment includes combining behavior therapy and medication especially for people with moderate to severe ADHD.

Behavior therapy mostly helps with managing the symptoms of ADHD. For children, parents and caregivers are taught how to encourage desired behavior through positive reinforcement such as praise and reward for pleasant behavior. This method also requires negative consequences dealt to children for any unwanted behavior.

Older teens and adults may benefit more from psychotherapy and behavioral strategies to improve their structure and organizational habits.

Medication can also be used to treat ADHD and can be accompanied by psychotherapy, depending on the person's need. People with anxiety may also experience additional problems, including sleep disorders and anxiety disorders, as mentioned earlier on.

Medication for ADHD consists of stimulants and non-stimulants which provide relief for the symptoms experienced by the individual affected.

Tips for parents to help children stay organized

- Discuss with your child about ADHD and its effects. Talking to your child through the symptoms and effects of ADHD can help them understand why they do what they do and how best they can manage their situation. Additionally, it helps them make sense of what they are experiencing.
- Making clear schedules (e.g., set and adhere to a specific bedtime) and maintain running routines with them.
- Simplifying your language and ensuring they have understood you when giving out instructions by being brief and specific.
- Making sure you focus on your child when talking to them; this can include maintaining eye contact and having a present body language during a conversation.
- Another important thing to do is to model the desired behavior. For example, you can practice or role-play how to practice calm behavior during social occasions with your child.
- Keeping track of your child's needs also involves communicating with the caregivers in your child's life, e.g., teachers, so they can receive the necessary help with their school work.
- A proper dietary plan can help manage ADHD. The caregiver needs to, however consult a professional about what foods to cut or include in the child's diet.
- Teachers also play a huge role in this conversation. They can help parents and medical practitioners catch early signs of ADHD or learning problems.
- Teachers also help by using learning methods that accommodate children affected by ADHD, for example, by minimizing environmental distractions, planning and structuring activities to improve the child's attentiveness, and taking short breaks during class.
- Finally, it is important to praise, acknowledge and even reward positive behavior in children with ADHD. This helps in encouraging further improvement. The caregivers also need to establish a network of support to help them cope.

Facts and Questions (FAQs) about ADHD

Did you know:

- More boys than girls get diagnosed with ADHD because girls have a higher probability of exhibiting symptoms of inattentiveness which often goes undiagnosed.

Inattention in girls goes unnoticed, mostly, because the symptoms are less obvious to the people in the environment as compared to symptoms of hyperactivity.

- Teenagers and adults with ADHD may find difficulty in organization and time management, coping with stress, focusing and completing their tasks, following instructions given and may find themselves being overly impulsive and taking too many risks.
- It is important to note that some people with ADHD sometimes also experience sleep disorders and anxiety disorders which mostly manifests in adolescence and adulthood.
- Above all, parents should keep a close eye on their children's developmental progress. If there are consistent delays, regression, or a change in a child's behavior, it is wise for a caregiver to seek the opinion of qualified professionals.