

What Is ADHD?

Reviewed by Psychology Today Staff on <https://www.psychologytoday.com/sg/basics/adhd>

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (previously known as attention deficit disorder or ADD) is a neurobehavioral disorder characterized by core symptoms of inattentiveness, distractibility, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. ADHD is thought to be the most common childhood mental health disorder, with estimates of its prevalence in children ranging from 5 to 11 percent. ADHD in adulthood is thought to be less common, with approximately 2 to 5 percent of adults diagnosed.

ADHD symptoms can interfere with work, school, household tasks, and relationships, and managing the disorder can be a challenge for both children and adults. Fortunately, there are treatments that have been shown to be effective, and anyone affected by ADHD can learn coping skills to work around struggles and harness their talents—as many successful individuals with ADHD have already done.

What does ADHD look like?

Some children and adults with ADHD find it difficult to concentrate on tasks at school or work and may daydream frequently. Children with ADHD may become disruptive, defiant, or have trouble getting along with parents, peers, or teachers. Children who struggle with hyperactivity and impulsivity, in particular, often have behavioral challenges that can be difficult for adults to manage.

Adults, on the other hand, may be more likely to report feeling restless or fidgety; if they struggle with impulsivity, they may make rash decisions that adversely affect their life. For both children and adults, executive functioning (planning, emotional regulation, and decision-making) is often affected as well. Many children and adults display either hyperactive or inattentive symptoms of ADHD, but it's also possible for both sets of symptoms to exist together, in what is typically called combined type ADHD.

Is ADHD real?



Most psychiatrists and psychologists agree that ADHD is real. It runs in families (suggesting genetic roots) and neurological evidence has found it to be associated with [alterations in brain growth and development](#). ADHD is also clearly linked to academic, work, and relationship problems—and responds to treatment—[suggesting that it has clinical validity](#). But whether the disorder is overdiagnosed and overtreated—or whether it reflects a set of evolved traits that have become less adaptive in today’s world—is widely debated.

What causes ADHD?



Like many other mental health disorders, the causes of ADHD remain under investigation. Genes are theorized to play a key role, as are environmental influences such as exposure to toxins in the womb and early traumatic experiences. Since ADHD is a behavioral disorder, expectations of appropriate behavior, particularly in children, likely influence diagnoses in some cases.

How is ADHD treated?



Experts have debated whether treatment for ADHD should be primarily behavioral (therapy, attention training, increased play, greater structure) or pharmacological. Several large studies have concluded that a combination of both may be most effective

Is ADHD genetic?



Significant evidence suggests that ADHD has both genetic and environmental underpinnings. Twin studies, for instance, have found that **identical twins are significantly more likely than fraternal twins** to both be diagnosed with ADHD or display ADHD-like behaviors. There is no single gene that is considered “responsible” for ADHD; rather, like many psychiatric conditions, it is thought to be linked to many genetic variants, only some of which have been uncovered

Is ADHD a disease of modernity?



Some experts argue that what we call ADHD is actually a “[disease of civilization](#)”—that is, a disorder that arises because of a mismatch between humans’ evolutionary roots and our modern environment. High energy levels, for instance, may have been adaptive for a hunter-gatherer but are problematic in a modern classroom. Some prominent child development experts have noted that the recent rise in ADHD diagnoses has coincided with an increased focus (particularly in American schools) on rigorous standardized testing and reduced playtime—suggesting that at least some children diagnosed with ADHD have been placed in environments that worsen the evolutionary mismatch.

Is ADHD a disability?



It depends. Under both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), ADHD can be legally considered a disability in some cases. But a diagnosis alone isn’t enough to qualify for protection under the law. In addition to a formal diagnosis, the individual (and/or their parent, if in an academic setting) must also establish that [symptoms substantially limit functioning](#). If such limitations can be adequately documented, reasonable accommodations must be provided by the employer or the school (if it is public).

Is ADHD a learning disability?



Though ADHD can and often does cause academic challenges, it is not considered a specific learning disability (such as dyslexia or dysgraphia). However, many children with ADHD—anywhere from 30 to 50 percent, according to some estimates—have a comorbid learning disability. The conditions can also display similar external symptoms, particularly in children.

I feel fidgety all the time. Do I have ADHD?



While fidgetiness is certainly an aspect of ADHD, the condition is more complex than physical restlessness. If, in addition to constant fidgetiness, you experience strong feelings of distractibility that persist in multiple settings, often behave impulsively, talk excessively, struggle to follow through on tasks or manage your time, and/or make careless mistakes on important projects, you may show symptoms of ADHD. Requesting an evaluation from a healthcare provider is the first step to receiving a diagnosis and initiating treatment.

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What does ADHD look like?



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For more on symptoms, see [ADHD Symptoms and Diagnosis](#).

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For more on the biology of ADHD, see [Causes and Risk Factors in ADHD](#).

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For more on the causes of ADHD, see [Causes and Risk Factors in ADHD](#).

How is ADHD treated?



Experts have debated whether treatment for ADHD should be primarily behavioral (therapy, attention training, increased play, greater structure) or pharmacological. Several large studies have concluded that a combination of both may be most effective.

For more on treatment options, see [Treatment of ADHD](#).

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For more on genes and other factors that may lead to ADHD, see [Causes and Risk Factors in ADHD](#).

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For more on living with ADHD in the modern world, see [Daily Management of ADHD](#).

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that [symptoms substantially limit functioning](#). If such limitations can be adequately documented, reasonable accommodations must be provided by the employer or the school (if it is public).

For more on accommodations, see [ADHD at School](#) or [ADHD in the Workplace](#).

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Though ADHD can and often does cause academic challenges, it is not considered a specific learning disability (such as dyslexia or dysgraphia). However, many children with ADHD—anywhere from 30 to 50 percent, according to some estimates—have a [comorbid](#) learning disability. The conditions can also display similar external symptoms, particularly in children.

For more on distinguishing ADHD from learning disabilities and other disorders, see [ADHD and Related Conditions](#).

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While fidgetiness is certainly an aspect of ADHD, the condition is more complex than physical restlessness. If, in addition to constant fidgetiness, you experience strong feelings of distractibility that persist in multiple settings,

often behave impulsively, talk excessively, struggle to follow through on tasks or manage your time, and/or make careless mistakes on important projects, you may show symptoms of ADHD. Requesting an evaluation from a healthcare provider is the first step to receiving a diagnosis and initiating treatment.

For more about symptoms and diagnosis, see [ADHD Symptoms and Diagnosis](#).

How can I best help my child manage his ADHD?



All children benefit from love, structure, and consistency; children with ADHD need all three in droves. Since ADHD symptoms and their resulting academic and social challenges can be damaging to a child's self-esteem, parents should take steps to find a treatment that works, help the child identify his strengths, and advocate for his needs as he learns to navigate the world on his own. Parents should also help the child set up routines, identify academic strategies that address her specific needs, and learn the social skills necessary in order to form lasting friendships.

Is ADHD good or bad for romantic relationships?



There is no single way that ADHD affects romantic relationships, and the condition often comes with both positives and negatives. Many couples, for instance, find that one partner's ADHD (or both, in some cases) enhances the relationship by making it more spontaneous or sexually fulfilling. Others, however, find that symptoms of distraction, disorganization, or impulsivity can lead to frustrating miscommunications between partners or trigger arguments.

Both partners—regardless of their own ADHD status—should be honest about any challenges that ADHD brings to the relationship, while also making an effort to appreciate its upsides whenever possible. Having compassion toward one's partner is critical for making any ADHD relationship work.

Does ADHD affect social skills?

ADHD can cause social challenges in both children and adults. Impulsive symptoms, for instance, may cause someone with ADHD to interrupt others frequently or blurt out inappropriate comments; inattentive symptoms, on the other hand, may make it difficult for someone with ADHD to follow a conversation or show up on time to an outing with a friend, which may make them appear rude or disinterested in the friendship. Many people with ADHD, however, are able to form close relationships with others. Explaining symptoms to loved ones, developing coping mechanisms, and seeking therapy to improve social skills can all help those with ADHD make up for social deficits and cultivate meaningful connections.

Do children with ADHD have a harder time making friends?

Children with ADHD are much more likely to struggle with social skills than their classmates. Some studies have found that [children with ADHD are more likely than their peers to report having no reciprocated friendships](#) and are more likely to report losing friends over a particular time period. Children with hyperactive ADHD may behave impulsively or aggressively, alienating peers as a result, while children with inattentive ADHD may appear withdrawn or unable to focus on games or conversations. Children may also struggle with emotional over-reactivity, which can be off-putting for peers. [Support and hands-on guidance from parents](#) is essential to helping children build social skills and gain confidence; behavior therapy or social skills groups can also help give children the tools they need to thrive.

ADHD at School

Both the inattentive and hyperactive symptoms that are characteristic of ADHD can cause difficulties at school. Modern classrooms do not always allow for freedom of movement, hands-on learning, or lessons that are tailored to unique interests and learning styles; thus, young children who speak out of turn, fidget excessively, find it difficult to manage their time, or struggle to pay attention to lectures may find it challenging to keep up or behave appropriately. Older students—in high school or beyond—may continue to find that their ADHD symptoms slow academic progress.

How can I help my child with ADHD excel in school?

Children with ADHD can keep up and even thrive at school, particularly if strategies addressing their specific challenges are deployed. ADHD treatment plans—whether behavioral or pharmacological—will often help students focus and tame problematic behavior, while specific accommodations can be used to adapt curricula, classroom environments, and testing procedures to their learning styles and to compensate for developmental delays. ADHD awareness among school staff, as well as a supportive environment that respects learning differences more generally, can also go a long way toward building a student's confidence and encouraging her to find areas in which she excels.

How can I tell if my child needs accommodations?

ADHD can hinder children's academic progress in several ways, not all of which are immediately obvious. If your child struggles to finish reasonable assignments, consistently receives poor grades, has frequent behavior problems that don't respond to typical discipline, or becomes anxious or upset when completing schoolwork, it could indicate that ADHD is interfering significantly with his progress—and that he could perhaps benefit from accommodations. A teacher expressing concern about a child's academic or behavioral challenges is another indicator that something is amiss. Whether or not the teacher raises the alarm, it may be possible to address the issues by working directly with them; when such informal interventions fail to help, however, [exploring accommodations](#) is a smart next step.

How do I get accommodations for ADHD?

First, [you should request the school evaluate your child](#), in order to assess how ADHD, learning disabilities, and other comorbid conditions are affecting her educational progress; this evaluation is provided at no cost. (In some

cases, the school will suggest that your child be evaluated, rather than the other way around.) The school will use the results of the evaluation to determine whether your child needs accommodations. If the school decides that your child does not need accommodations, you may appeal and/or seek an outside evaluation; you may need to pay for this out of pocket.