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## Patient education: Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in children (The Basics)

[Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate](#)

**What is ADHD?** — ADHD is a condition that can make it hard to sit still, pay attention, or make good decisions. ADHD often begins in childhood. ADHD can cause a child to have trouble in school, at home, or with friends. ADHD is more common in boys than girls. ADHD stands for "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder." Some people call it just ADD (attention deficit disorder).

There is no cure for ADHD, but different treatments can help improve a child's symptoms and behavior.

**What are the symptoms of ADHD?** — Children with ADHD have one or more of the following symptoms:

- Increased activity, also called "hyperactivity" – A child might have trouble sitting still or playing quietly.
- Poor decision-making – A child might interrupt others or do things without thinking them through.
- Trouble paying attention – A child might be forgetful, lose things, or have trouble finishing a project.

Symptoms often begin by the time a child is 4 years old and can change over time. Children often continue to have symptoms as teenagers or adults.

**Is there a test for ADHD?** — No. There is no test. If you suspect your child has ADHD, talk to your child's doctor or nurse. He or she will ask about your child's symptoms and behavior at home and at school. To find out about your child's behavior at school, you will need to ask his or her teacher.

A doctor can make a diagnosis of ADHD only if a child's symptoms:

- Are seen in more than one place, for example, at home and in school
- Last at least 6 months
- Start before age 12
- Affect his or her friendships or school work

Other conditions can cause symptoms similar to ADHD. For example, children who have trouble learning to read can also have a tough time in school. Your child's doctor or nurse will try to figure out what is causing your child's symptoms. But this might involve a few visits to the doctor.

**Is ADHD a condition that needs to be treated?** — Most doctors recommend that ADHD be treated. Children with untreated ADHD are more likely than children whose ADHD is treated to have a hard time in school, become depressed, or have accidents.

**How is ADHD treated?** — ADHD can be treated in different ways. Treatment can improve symptoms and help children do better at school, at home, and with friends. Children with ADHD might have one or more of the following treatments:

- **Medicines** – Doctors can prescribe different medicines to help children pay attention and concentrate better. ADHD medicines are often very effective at improving the condition, but they can cause side effects. Tell your doctor if your child has any problems while taking ADHD medicine. Some children need to try more than one medicine to find the one that is right for them.
- **Behavior treatment** – You might find that you can improve your child's behavior by making changes at home. For instance, you can make a checklist for your child to use every morning so that he or she remembers what to do. Or you can have your child keep homework in the same place so he or she doesn't lose it.
- **Changes at school** – Teachers can make changes in the classroom to help children with ADHD do better in school. For example, a teacher might write down what the homework is every day so the child does not forget. Or a teacher might allow a child to have extra time to finish school work. Parents should work with the teacher and school to create a "school plan" that is right for their child. Keep in mind that a school plan might need to change over time as a child gets older or if symptoms change.

Some children with ADHD have other problems, too. These can include problems with learning, anxiety, or trouble sleeping. It's important to work with your child's doctor to treat these problems if needed. Sometimes, this can even help improve ADHD symptoms.

You might hear or read about treatments for ADHD that include things like special vitamins or diets. Experts do not know if these help improve symptoms. Check with a doctor before trying any of these treatments.

**Can adults be diagnosed with ADHD?** — Yes. ADHD can run in families. Some adults figure out that they have ADHD only after their child is diagnosed with it. For example, a man might see that he has the same symptoms as his son. ADHD can also cause adults to have trouble at work or with relationships.

If you are an adult and suspect that you have ADHD, talk with your doctor or nurse about treatment. Some people also find it helpful to talk to a counselor or go to a self-help group to learn ways to manage symptoms.

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