Understanding What ADHD Is (and Isn't)

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Your Complete Guide to What Is ADHD

Let me guess, either you or someone close to you have ADHD. If so, you're in luck. This complete ADHD guide has the answers you need to put your mind at rest and help you decide on the best course of action.

In this guide, I use the term "ADHDer" a lot because it carries less stigma than "people with ADHD." You pronounce the term "ADHDer" as AYE-DEE-AYECHH-DEE-ER.

Some of the topics this guide covers are:

- What is ADHD?
- Diagnosis and treatments for ADHD.
- Is ADHD a disability?
- Surprising facts about ADHD
- What to do if you think you or your child is an ADHDer.

What Is ADHD?

ADHD stands for **A**ttention **D**eficit **H**yperactivity **D**isorder. Once known as ADD, ADHD is hereditary. ADHD is a neurological disorder, meaning it originates from your brain.

Most ADHDers are born with ADHD. We either inherit it from our parents or grandparents. The environment and society a person grows up in can also influence ADHD. Just not to the extent genetics can.

Please note ADHD almost always affects a person for their entire life. The good news is that most ADHDers develop coping skills, so it is not so bad in adulthood.

ADHD impairs a person's self-control. ADHDers have trouble focusing, controlling their emotions, and maintaining relationships.

The Different Types of ADHD

But don't go assuming all ADHDers are the same. There are three types of ADHD.

1. Inattentive Type

Inattentive ADHD makes it difficult for you to control your attention, organize, and remember.

You have difficulty listening and following directions. You often forgo responsibility or do things in an inefficient manner.

You are usually late to meetings or school. You don't get much done with the time you have, which makes doing school work or "adult" work harder.

You forget about mundane things, like where you put your phone or your car keys. Short-term memory problems are common with all types of ADHD and especially noticeable with this type.

2. Hyperactive-impulsive Type

Someone with this type of ADHD struggles with self-control. They move around a lot and blurt things out, for better or worse.

On the hyperactive side, they feel the need to move around. They talk a lot. On the impulsive side, they hardly ever think before they say or do.

This can be the most self-destructive type of ADHD.

3. Combination Type

You get diagnosed for this type of ADHD when you exhibit at least six or more symptoms of both inattentive and hyperactive-impulsive ADHD. (12+ symptoms total.)

How Is ADHD Diagnosed?

Not easily. It takes time, especially if you are an adult.

While we are on the subject, ignore any myths you might hear about ADHD. For example, you may have heard males have ADHD more than females. We know for a *fact* males and females have ADHD at almost equal rates.

To get an ADHD diagnosis, you will need to see a specialist. Most "regular" doctors don't have the time or training to diagnose ADHD.

Whoever you choose to see will determine if you have at least six symptoms of ADHD. They will need to review your medical history, so have it ready.

Some examples of ADHD symptoms include:

- Fidgeting
- Forgetfulness
- Difficulty resisting impulses
- Challenges with socialization
- Daydreaming/Lack of focus
- Communication problems

Every specialist has their own way of doing things. However, ADHD can be mistaken for other disorders like autism or dyslexia. So expect lots of screening to prevent misdiagnosis.

Don't expect to get an ADHD diagnosis from one doctor's visit.

Next page: ADHD treatment options and more.

ADHD Treatment Options

You can treat ADHD with medication and therapy. Sometimes all these treatments run together. I'll explain each treatment type below.

Note that most research for treating ADHD focuses on children. But whether you are a child or an adult, you can find a treatment that meets your needs.

Stimulant Medications

These medications increase the amount of dopamine in your brain. The more dopamine you have, the easier it is to focus, be happy, and sustain attention.

Medication is by far the most effective and simple way to treat ADHD. Expect a few test runs to see what dosage and which medication works best for you.

Common side effects of stimulant medications include:

- Anxiousness
- Increased irritability
- Weight loss
- Upset stomach
- A headache
- Trouble sleeping
- Dry mouth
- Higher blood pressure

Rare side effects of stimulant medications include:

- Seeing or hearing things
- Allergic reaction
- Suicidal thoughts

If you choose to use medication, remember that pills don’t teach skills.

Behavior Therapy

Behavior therapy aims to turn bad behavior into good behavior. It also helps develop good behaviors you may be lacking.

Behavior therapy helps you set measurable goals and create routines. It works wonders when you use it alongside medication.

Eat and be Healthy

Having a healthy diet reduces ADHD symptoms and improves your life.

Eat fruits, veggies, and whole grains. Also, drink at least 8 cups of water per day and make sure you go to sleep on time.

Be sure to avoid:

- Processed food
- Fast food
- Food coloring
- Soda

Support Groups

Support groups are a great way for you to connect with others who are facing similar issues.

At a support group, you exchange ideas and solutions. In the process, you can make new friends and receive emotional support. It's like therapy, but free. You can find support groups online or in your community.

Pets Therapy for ADHD

Whether you're a child or an adult ADHDer, a pet can give you priceless emotional and mental support. And if you're not a pet person, that's too bad because the mental benefits of having a pet are indisputable.

Studies show having a pet results in:

- Lower cholesterol
- Lower blood pressure
- Decreased levels of stress
- Reduced anxiety and depression
- Overall improvement in mental health.

Cats and dogs are good. Although most dogs are not as smart as cats, they tend to love harder. Dogs and cats don't criticize, judge or voice their opinions. And best of all they will cuddle up next to you even if you haven't taken a shower for a while.

Is ADHD a Disability?

Not in most cases.

An ADHD diagnosis alone will not qualify someone for disability benefits.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) an individual with ADHD may be considered disabled if they meet certain criteria.

The ADHD Disability Criteria:

You have to prove you have all three of the following symptoms:

1. Marked inattention
2. Marked impulsiveness
3. Marked hyperactivity

You also have to prove you have at least two of the following conditions because of ADHD:

1. Impaired cognitive/communication function
2. Impaired social functioning
3. Impaired personal functioning

You will most likely need documentation from your physician, employer, and/or school teacher to meet the criteria.

Next page: ADHD and co-existing disorders, and facts about ADHD.

ADHD and Co-existing Disorders

More than two-thirds of ADHDers have a co-existing disorder. Any disorder can co-exist with ADHD, but certain disorder occurs more often.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD)

ODD is a disruptive behavior disorder.

Those who have ODD show patterns of anger and irritability. Most children go through a phase where they are defiant. This makes it hard to recognize ODD.

According to CHADD, a national resource for ADHD, up to half of all ADHD children have ODD. The good news is children can outgrow ODD with patience and discipline.

Adults can have ODD as well.

Learning Disorders

Up to 50 percent of those with ADHD have a coexisting learning disorder, dyslexia being the most common.

Dyslexia makes it challenging to learn how to read and recognize words. Children with dyslexia often fall behind in academics and general knowledge in comparison to their peers.

Mood Disorders

About 38 percent of adults ADHDers have a mood disorder. The most obvious symptom of a mood disorder is sudden changes in mood for no apparent reason.

Depression

- 14 percent of children with ADHD have depression.
- 47 percent of adults with ADHD have depression.

As someone with ADHD, I can't say I'm surprised with these numbers. Being happy isn't easy in a world where everyone's "normal" is different from your own.

Anxiety Disorder

Up to 30 percent of children ADHDers and up to 53 percent of adult ADHDers have an anxiety disorder. People with anxiety over-worry about problems.

We all experience anxiety. But if you continue to feel it for weeks or even years on a daily basis, you may have an anxiety disorder.

Tourette Syndrome

About 7 percent of those with ADHD have Tourettes, but 60 percent of those with Tourette syndrome have ADHD.

Symptoms of Tourette syndrome include involuntary movement and speech.

Most people know about Tourettes because they saw it on TV. Contrary to popular belief, most cases of Tourette syndrome are so mild they go undiagnosed or are mistaken for something else.

10 Surprising Facts About ADHD

1. ADHD Can Have Advantages

People with ADHD have a unique superpower that allows them to enter an intense state of mental focus. We call it hyperfocus.

This power is very useful in the hands of an entrepreneur, athlete or self-employed person.

Here's proof to back that claim up:

- Richard Branson founded a billion dollar company. He has ADHD.
- Serena Williams is a tennis world champion. She has ADHD.
- Michael Jordan is a living legend on and off the basketball court. He has ADHD.
- David Neeleman founded JetBlue Airlines. He has ADHD.
- Michael Phelps has won gold medals in the Olympics. He has ADHD.
- Emma Watson starred as Hermione in Harry Potter. She has ADHD.

Don't get me wrong, many ADHDers don't use ADHD to their advantage. But that's because those people are fighting against ADHD instead of embracing who they are.

2. People With ADHD Have Amazing Qualities

- **Gumption:** ADHD people are known for not being able to focus… *on boring stuff*. But when it comes to stuff they find interesting, challenging, curious, or urgent, they will pour their mind and body into it.
- **Creativity:** ADHDers lose focus when they get bored, so they often daydream for fun. This helps them make connections (whether by accident or not) others wouldn't dream of, literally. People say creativity is a symptom of ADHD. I believe ADHD is a symptom of creativity.
- **A sense of humor:** The funniest people you know are those who suffer the most on the inside, where you can't see. The average person with ADHD fits that description. .
- **Unique perspectives**: People with ADHD are often objective. Because of this, they look at situations from multiple angles. Maybe it's because ADHDers are by default set apart from everyone else.
- **Pragmatic:** Having ADHD makes it easier for you to analyze situations and form connections. Inventors like Albert Einstein and Thomas Edison had symptoms of ADHD.
- **Tolerance:** Many ADHDers go through more than a "normal" amount of life struggles. They know as much about suffering as they do joy. This makes ADHDers good at connecting and empathizing with others.

3. ADHDers Don't Have Trouble Sustaining Attention

There's a common misconception out there that people with ADHD can't focus on anything and their minds always wander. That's only half true (our minds do wander often.)

ADHDers can focus on things they like far better than anyone else who likes the same thing can. But what they really have trouble with is controlling their attention. There are 4 elements that glue ADHDers. (I'll explain those directly below.)

10 Surprising Facts About ADHD

4. If You Want an ADHDer to Focus, You Better Involve These 4 Elements

- Urgency (deadlines, due dates, now or never circumstances, rare chances)
- Interest (video games, books, passions, sports, etc.)
- Challenge (an actual challenge, or anything difficult)
- Curiosity (discovering a new interest, learning more about what they already like)

Without those 4 elements, all hope is lost when it comes to getting an ADHDer to sustain attention. All an ADHDer has to do is discover what area in life they feel those 4 elements and they will be able to thrive in it.

5. An ADHD Diagnosis Is Often a Misdiagnosis, Especially for Men

There is a common myth about ADHD being a "boy" problem. I can say to you, with 100 percent certainty (in part thanks to several studies) that this is nothing more than a myth.

Yet in the 21st century, males are still three times more likely to receive a diagnosis for ADHD than females. This is despite the fact that studies, cited at the bottom of this guide, show ADHD occurs equally in males and females.

The reason why ADHD is so often misdiagnosed is because there is still not much agreement in the medical community on how to diagnose it. And yes, even people with medical degrees can believe in common myths and stereotypes.

Always ask for a second opinion instead of “accepting” an ADHD diagnosis.

6. Between 5-11 Percent of the U.S. Population has ADHD

The CDC says that 11 percent of American children, ages 4 to 17, have ADHD as of 2011. Other sources say 5 percent.

If you take the average of those two percentages, which is, 8 percent, about 20 million Americans have ADHD.

7. ADD and ADHD are the Same Condition

If you didn’t know, now you know.

The cause of ADHD is usually genetic. Most people inherit ADHD from their parents or grandparents. If you as a parent have ADHD, your child has a 35 percent chance of having it. If your child has it, there’s a 50 percent chance you have it.

This doesn’t mean there’s such thing as an ADHD gene. In theory, a certain set of genes combined with a certain type of environment can cause ADHD symptoms to develop.

8. Children Can Have a Different Type of ADHD from Their Parents

Don’t assume you or your children will have the same type of ADHD.

9. ADHD Affects Short-term Memory, but Not Intelligence

You can find ADHDers in every profession and level of government. Being smart or more educated helps too. But the condition itself doesn’t make you any more dumber than the next person.

However, ADHD does affect short-term memory. Studies (all done with children of course) show children with ADHD have more problems with short-term memory than non-ADHD children.

As an adult ADHDer, I often notice my short-term memory. It’s only noticeable when I’m fatigued.

10. You Have to Learn ADHD Coping Skills as a Child or Else

Disclaimer: I learned all my coping skills as an adult.

Learning coping skills as a child is essential to success as an adult ADHDer. Children with ADHD need to learn *unique* coping skills because they have a *unique* condition.

Many adult ADHDers can’t hold a job or maintain relationships for long. They come in to work late CHRONICALLY and get fired. They make impulsive remarks by accident and lose their friends.

Please make sure your child learns the necessary coping skills to thrive with ADHD before they enter adulthood. The skills they need depend on the ADHD and type of person they are.

Regardless of their ADHD type, most ADHDers will benefit from learning how to manage their emotions and use

to-do list.

What to Do If You Think You Have ADHD

First things first, the average doctor won't be of much use. And you certainly can't go to a walk in clinic for a diagnosis.

You need to get a referral to a medical professional who specializes in treating ADHD. The most qualified people to teach ADHD are more than medical school graduates. They are the people who went out of their way to learn how to treat ADHD.

When you go to see a specialist, you will almost always start off with a clinical review. Then you might tell them you are impulsive or inattentive to the point where it's negatively affecting your life. This clinical review can take between 2 to 4 hours.

They will ask you "how" and "why" and analyze your past medical history. From there, diagnosing ADHD is different for children and adults. It's easier to diagnose ADHD in children because teachers and parents can both weigh in.

Getting a diagnosis as an adult is much harder because parents and teachers probably won't be able to weigh in. In that case, an adult would need to bring their spouse or a friend to help answer clinical questions.

As I said, not everyone can treat ADHD. I don't want you to waste your time or money. So here's a few red flags you should watch out for:

- Brain imaging: There's no data showing this is effective in diagnosing ADHD. Definitely a waste of money.
- Neuro-psychological tests (as in brain tests): Studying a person's brain for a couple of hours in an office setting *can't* give a clear picture of who they really are.

And fair warning, if the specialist you visit offers to write you a prescription right away, that's a bad sign. If they don't include how you functioned at school in their evaluation, that's also a bad sign.

Don't let someone give you or your child a diagnosis without a thorough evaluation.