

# Understanding ADHD in Adults

*A Patient Information Guide*

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## What is ADHD?

**Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** is a **neurodevelopmental condition** that affects how the brain manages attention, activity levels, and impulse control.

Although ADHD begins in **childhood**, many people are **not diagnosed until adulthood**. Some adults may have learned to cope with symptoms for many years before seeking help.

ADHD can affect different areas of life including:

- Work or study performance
- Organization and time management
- Relationships
- Emotional regulation
- Daily tasks and responsibilities

Importantly, ADHD is **not caused by laziness or lack of intelligence**. It reflects differences in how certain brain networks function.

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## What Causes ADHD? (Etiology)

ADHD does **not have a single cause**. Research suggests it develops due to a combination of **genetic and biological factors**.

### Genetics

ADHD is strongly **heritable**.

- Around **70–80% of ADHD risk is genetic**.
- ADHD often runs in families.
- Parents, siblings, or relatives may have ADHD or similar traits.

### Brain Function

Brain imaging studies show differences in areas responsible for:

- Attention
- Planning and organisation

- Impulse control
- Motivation and reward processing

These differences affect neurotransmitters such as **dopamine and norepinephrine**, which help regulate attention and behaviour.

## Early Development Factors

Some factors that may increase risk include:

- Premature birth
- Low birth weight
- Prenatal exposure to alcohol, nicotine, or drugs
- Early brain injury

However, many people with ADHD **do not have any identifiable risk factors**.

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## ADHD Across the Lifespan

ADHD **starts in childhood**, but symptoms may change with age.

### In Childhood

Children may show:

- Difficulty sitting still
- Forgetfulness
- Trouble following instructions
- Interrupting others
- Disorganisation

### In Adolescence

Symptoms may shift toward:

- Poor time management
- Academic difficulties
- Emotional impulsivity
- Risk-taking behaviours

### In Adults

Hyperactivity may become **inner restlessness**, while difficulties with:

- organisation

- procrastination
- maintaining attention
- emotional regulation

may continue.

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## How is Adult ADHD Assessed?

ADHD assessment in adults is **comprehensive** and involves gathering information from multiple sources.

A diagnosis cannot be made based on **one questionnaire alone**.

### Components of an Assessment

A typical assessment includes:

1. **Detailed Clinical Interview**
  2. **Review of childhood history**
  3. **ADHD symptom questionnaires**
  4. **Assessment of functioning**
  5. **Screening for other mental health conditions**
  6. **Collateral information where possible**
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## Importance of Childhood History

Because ADHD is a **neurodevelopmental condition**, symptoms must have been present in **childhood (before age 12)**.

During assessment, clinicians often ask about:

- School performance
- Teacher reports
- Behaviour in class
- Homework completion
- Organisation
- Forgetfulness
- Impulsivity
- Family observations

Helpful information may include:

- **Old school reports**

- **Parent or caregiver accounts**
- **Childhood records**

Not everyone will have documentation available. In these cases, **recalled history and family reports** may still provide useful information.

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## DSM-5 Diagnostic Criteria for ADHD

Clinicians use the **Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)** to guide diagnosis.

ADHD symptoms fall into **two main groups**:

1. **Inattention**
2. **Hyperactivity and Impulsivity**

Adults require **at least 5 symptoms** from either category.

Symptoms must:

- Persist for **at least 6 months**
  - Be **inconsistent with developmental level**
  - Cause **impairment in functioning**
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### Inattention Symptoms

Examples include:

- Frequently making careless mistakes
  - Difficulty sustaining attention in tasks
  - Appearing not to listen when spoken to
  - Difficulty following through on instructions
  - Poor organisation
  - Avoiding tasks requiring sustained effort
  - Losing important items
  - Easily distracted
  - Forgetfulness in daily activities
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### Hyperactivity and Impulsivity Symptoms

Examples include:

- Feeling restless or unable to sit still
  - Fidgeting or tapping hands/feet
  - Difficulty engaging in quiet activities
  - Feeling “driven by a motor”
  - Talking excessively
  - Interrupting others
  - Difficulty waiting turn
  - Acting without thinking
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## Additional DSM-5 Requirements

For a diagnosis of ADHD:

- Symptoms must have been **present before age 12**
  - Symptoms must occur in **two or more settings** (e.g., home, work, school)
  - Symptoms must cause **clinically significant impairment**
  - Symptoms cannot be better explained by another condition
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## Common Myths About ADHD

### **Myth: ADHD only affects children**

**Fact:** ADHD often continues into adulthood. Many adults are diagnosed later in life.

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### **Myth: People with ADHD are lazy**

**Fact:** ADHD affects the brain’s ability to regulate attention and motivation. Difficulties are neurological, not a lack of effort.

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### **Myth: If someone did well in school, they cannot have ADHD**

**Fact:** Many individuals with ADHD are intelligent and may compensate with extra effort.

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### **Myth: ADHD is caused by poor parenting**

**Fact:** ADHD is a **neurodevelopmental condition**, not the result of parenting style.

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## **Myth: ADHD medication is addictive**

**Fact:** When used appropriately under medical supervision, ADHD medications are **safe and evidence-based treatments**.

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## Treatment Options for Adult ADHD

ADHD treatment usually involves a **combination of approaches**.

These may include:

- Medication
- Psychological strategies
- Lifestyle adjustments
- Coaching or organisational support

Medication is often **one part of a broader treatment plan**.

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## Stimulant Medications

Stimulants are the **first-line treatment** for many adults with ADHD.

They work by increasing **dopamine and norepinephrine** activity in the brain.

These chemicals help regulate:

- Attention
- Motivation
- Impulse control
- Working memory

## Common Stimulant Medications

### **Methylphenidate-based medications**

Examples:

- Ritalin
- Concerta

### **Amphetamine-based medications**

Examples:

- Dexamphetamine
- Lisdexamfetamine (Vyvanse)

## Benefits

Many patients report:

- Improved focus
- Better task completion
- Reduced impulsivity
- Improved productivity

## Possible Side Effects

Some people may experience:

- Reduced appetite
- difficulty sleeping
- dry mouth
- increased heart rate
- mild anxiety

Most side effects are **mild and manageable**.

Clinicians usually begin with **low doses and gradually adjust**.

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## Non-Stimulant Medications

Non-stimulant medications may be used when:

- stimulants are not effective
- stimulants cause side effects
- there are medical reasons to avoid stimulants

### Common Options

#### Atomoxetine (Strattera)

A selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor.

#### Guanfacine

A medication that affects noradrenergic signalling and may improve impulse control.

## Characteristics

Compared with stimulants:

- Effects may take **several weeks**
  - Often **less potent**
  - May still be helpful for some individuals
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## Psychological and Lifestyle Strategies

Medication alone is usually **not sufficient**.

Helpful strategies may include:

### Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

Can help with:

- organisation
- procrastination
- emotional regulation
- planning

### ADHD Coaching

Focuses on practical skills such as:

- time management
- goal setting
- routines

### Lifestyle Supports

Helpful habits include:

- regular sleep
  - exercise
  - structured routines
  - external reminders and planning tools
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## When to Seek Help

You may wish to seek assessment if you experience:

- persistent difficulty concentrating
- chronic disorganisation
- procrastination
- forgetfulness
- impulsivity
- difficulties maintaining work or relationships

Especially if these difficulties have been **present since childhood**.

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## Key Points to Remember

- ADHD is a **neurodevelopmental condition**, not a personal failing.
- Symptoms usually **begin in childhood**.
- ADHD can affect **adults as well as children**.
- Diagnosis requires a **comprehensive assessment**.
- **Effective treatments are available**, including medications and psychological strategies.

With the right support, many individuals with ADHD are able to **manage symptoms successfully and thrive**.