What Is ADHD?

ADHD is short for **attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder** (uh-TEN-shun DEF-uh-sit HYE-pur-ak-TIV-uh-tee dis-ORD-ur). ADHD makes it hard to sit still, pay attention, take turns, and finish things. It is one of the most common chronic (long-term) problems of childhood.

All children have problems behaving sometimes. Children with ADHD have a *very hard* time behaving a *lot* of the time. They usually have problems behaving in school and at home.

The cause of ADHD is not clear. We know the brain works a little differently in a child with ADHD. We also know it runs in families. There is no cure, but we are learning more every day. Children who get treatment can do very well.

Symptoms of ADHD

A child with ADHD may have one or more of these problems:

Inattention (IN-uh-TEN-shin)

- Has trouble paying attention
- Daydreams and is easily distracted
- Can't get organized and forgets things

Hyperactivity (HYE-pur-ak-TIV-uh-tee)

- Is moving almost all the time
- Has trouble sitting still, squirms, and talks too much

Impulsivity (IM-puhl-SIV-uh-tee)

- Acts and talks without thinking
- Has trouble taking turns and interrupts a lot

Hyperactivity and impulsivity go together. Or maybe the child just has trouble paying attention. Most children with ADHD have all the problems above.

Finding Out If Your Child Has ADHD

If your child has ADHD, the symptoms will:

- Happen in more than one place, like home, school, team sports, and camps.
- Be worse than in other children the same age.
- Start before your child is 7 years old.
- Last more than 6 months.
- Make it hard for your child to do well at school and in other group activities.

Call your child's doctor if you think your child may have ADHD. The doctor will talk with you both and check your child.

You should know:

- It is hard to diagnose ADHD in children younger than 6 years.
- The doctor will ask about how your child behaves at home, school, and other places. The doctor may have you or your child's teacher fill out a form to learn about your child's behavior.
- There are other problems that have the same symptoms as ADHD. And some children have ADHD with other behavior problems, like not obeying, anxiety, learning problems, or depression.

Are There Medical Tests for ADHD?

There is no proven medical test for ADHD at this time. Blood tests; computer tests; x-rays, like MRIs or CAT scans; or brain-wave tests don't help diagnose ADHD. Your child's doctor may have other reasons for ordering these tests. Ask the doctor if you have questions.

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Treatment

There is no cure for ADHD. But there are many good treatments to help your child. As a parent, you are very important in the treatment process.

Your child's doctor will help you make a long-term plan for managing your child's ADHD. The plan will have:

- Goals (often called "target outcomes"). Example: better schoolwork
- Activities to help reach your child's goals. Examples: taking medicine, making changes at school and at home
- Ways to check your child's progress toward the goals.

Most ADHD plans include:

Medicine. For most children, drugs called stimulants (STIM-yuh-lints) are safe and work well. They speed up the signals in your child's brain. This helps your child focus and can help other symptoms too. There may be other medicines that the doctor suggests. The doctor may prescribe these *instead* of stimulants, or *together* with stimulants.

Behavior therapy. This helps parents, teachers, and other caregivers learn better ways to relate to the child with ADHD. You will learn how to set and enforce rules. And your child will learn better ways to control his or her behavior.

Working with the school. Treatment works best when everyone works as a team. The team should include doctors, parents, teachers, caregivers, and children themselves. Talk with the teacher or principal if you think your child needs more help.

By law, public schools must:

- Pay for testing for a child with learning problems.
- Use teaching methods that meet children's needs.
- Give extra help when needed.

It may take time to find the right treatment for your child. And treatment may not get rid of all the ADHD problems. But treatment with both medicine and behavior therapy helps most school-aged children with ADHD.

What Else Should Parents Know?

You are not alone. There are parent training and support groups for ADHD. These can be a great help. Being the parent of a child with ADHD can be hard. Seek counseling if you feel overwhelmed or hopeless. Ask your child's doctor where you can find this kind of help.

Answers to Common Questions

Will my child outgrow ADHD?
ADHD usually lasts into adulthood. People with ADHD can live good, productive lives. Having lots of energy can help in some careers.

Do children get "high" on stimulants?
Stimulants *don't* make children high. They don't make children sleepy or "dopey" either. But it's important for your child to get the right kind and amount of medicine for him or her. That's why regular doctor visits are important.

Do schools put children on ADHD medicines?
Sometimes teachers are the first to notice signs of ADHD. But only a doctor can say whether your child has ADHD and order medicine for it.

To learn more, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site at www.aap.org.
Your child's doctor will tell you to do what's best for your child.
This information should not take the place of talking with your child's doctor.

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