



ADHD IN ADULTS

Attention-deficit/
hyperactivity
disorder (ADHD)
can affect adults
and it can cause
a lot of distress

Everyone feels distracted and restless at times. For the most of us, the feelings pass and we can easily get back to work. Some people struggle with these problems for many years.

Some people don't realize they have an illness until their child has similar problems and is diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Others don't even realize that they have an illness—they assume their illness is “just who they are.” Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder can affect adults, too, and it can cause a lot of distress. But proper diagnosis and treatment can help you feel better and gain control of your life.

WHAT IS IT?

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, affects the way you act and focus. ADHD is usually diagnosed in school-aged children, but it can continue to cause problems into adulthood. About two-thirds of people living with ADHD continue to experience symptoms as an adult.

If you live with ADHD, you might have problems paying attention, concentrating on one task or organizing things. You might make careless mistakes at work or frequently forget things. This is the inattention group of symptoms. You might have a hard time sitting still, fidget all the time or feel very restless. Or you might have a hard time controlling urges and take a lot of risks. You might do things without considering the results or act before you think. This is the hyperactivity and impulsivity group of symptoms. These symptoms last for a long time, don't change in different places (such as at work and at home), and can cause a lot of distress or problems.

Inattention symptoms in particular tend to affect adults, and may also make tasks like planning and setting priorities difficult. A type of inattention more common in



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COULD I HAVE ADHD?

- I have a hard time starting projects, especially if they require a lot of thinking or concentration
- I have a hard time finalizing small details once the challenging parts of a task are finished
- I often forget about meetings and other day-to-day obligations
- I focus strongly on things that catch my interest to the point that time seems to disappear and I miss important obligations
- I have a hard time organizing things, such as projects at work or my finances
- I often fidget or feel very restless
- I often feel like I have to move or do something active
- I seem to have a harder time coping with frustration, stress, anger, or setbacks than others
- I've experienced these symptoms since I was young

Talk to your doctor if you feel that many of the above statements apply to you, happen often and cause a lot of problems.

adults is hyperfocus: focusing so strongly on something that catches your interest that it's difficult to move your attention to more important tasks. While it may sound like the opposite of inattention, hyperfocus makes it hard to pay attention to information or tasks that should have priority.

Impulsivity may be less frequent or obvious in adults than in children, but the impact of impulsive decisions can be very harmful. For example, adults may quit school, quit a job, get into car accidents, or have problems with substance use.

You may be diagnosed as an adult with ADHD, but you must have experienced some ADHD symptoms by the age of 12—there is no such thing as ADHD that starts when you're an adult. Some people cope with symptoms when they were children, but the demands of adulthood make the symptoms more obvious and more troublesome.

WHY IS ADHD IN ADULTS HARD TO DIAGNOSE?

ADHD can be harder to diagnose in adults for some of these reasons:

- Other mental illnesses can cause problems with attention or behaviour so it may be harder to see what's going on. For example, some mood disorders can cause problems with concentration, some anxiety disorders can cause problems with restlessness, and some personality disorders can cause problems with impulsivity
- Clinicians may have less training to recognize ADHD in adults, although this is starting to improve
- Adults can develop coping strategies that “hide” symptoms. For example, an adult who feels very restless can choose a busy, fast-paced job

WHO DOES IT AFFECT?

About 4% of adults experience some or all ADHD symptoms. It affects men and women almost equally.

- **Family members**—ADHD seems to run in families, so you are much more likely to have ADHD if a close biological relative has ADHD.
- **Other mental illnesses**—More than three-quarters of adults living with ADHD have another mental illness. The most common mental illnesses are depression, bipolar disorder, social anxiety disorder, substance use disorders and personality disorders.

ADHD is likely caused or influenced by many different things. Examples include your genes, the environment you live in, and your life experiences.

WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT IT?

ADHD is usually treated with a combination of medication, counselling and self-care.

- **Medication**—Adults are often treated with the same kind of stimulant and non-stimulant ADHD medication as children. If you are interested in trying a medication, talk to your doctor so you can discuss the best options based on your health needs and goals.



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- **Psychotherapy**—Cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) teaches you the relationship between your thoughts, moods and behaviours. It has been adapted to help people living with ADHD. A therapist can also help you make changes in your behaviour. These changes help you replace unhelpful behaviours with helpful behaviours. This may help you manage symptoms and live well. It's also important to learn about ADHD, which should be part of any type of counselling. Family therapy can help your entire family understand ADHD.
- **Self-help**—Strategies like maintaining a consistent schedule and using notes, lists or charts to keep you on track may help. Some people find it useful to change their work environment, such as working in a quieter location, using headphones to block noise, changing lighting, or scheduling more frequent breaks. Your mental health practitioner can suggest specific strategies to help you cope with your symptoms. Many adults living with ADHD experience sleep problems, so good sleep habits are particularly important. Strategies like regular exercise, eating well, staying in touch with family and friends, joining a support group, and doing things you enjoy can help everyone improve their well-being.

WHERE DO I GO FROM HERE?

In addition to talking to your family doctor, check out the resources below for more information about attention deficit hyperactivity disorder:

BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information

Visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca for the Managing a Mental Illness series of info sheets, which are full of information and tips to help you learn more and take charge of your health.

Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA)

Visit www.caddra.ca for information and resources, including the Canadian ADHD Practice Guidelines for doctors.

Centre for ADHD Awareness, Canada (CADDAC)

Visit www.caddac.ca for information and resources, advocacy tips, strategies for students pursuing post-secondary education, and more.

Resources available in many languages:

*For each service below, if English is not your first language, say the name of your preferred language in English to be connected to an interpreter. More than 100 languages are available.

HealthLink BC

Call 811 or visit www.healthlinkbc.ca to access free, non-emergency health information for anyone in your family, including mental health information. Through 811, you can also speak to a registered nurse about symptoms you're worried about, or talk with a pharmacist about medication questions.

BC Mental Health Support Line

If you are in distress, or for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to, call 310-6789 (no area code) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC distress line, without a wait or busy signal.



Canadian Mental Health Association
British Columbia
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Mental health and substance use
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Provincial Health Services Authority
Province-wide solutions.
Better health.

Founded in 1918, the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) is the most established, most extensive community mental health organization in Canada. Through a presence in hundreds of neighbourhoods across every province, CMHA provides advocacy and resources that help to prevent mental health problems and illnesses, support recovery and resilience, and enable all Canadians to flourish and thrive.

Visit the CMHA BC website at www.cmha.bc.ca.

CMHA BC is proud to be affiliated with HeretoHelp. HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Substance Use Information, a group of non-profit agencies providing good-quality information to help individuals and families maintain or improve their mental well-being. The BC Partners are funded by the Provincial Health Services Authority.

For more information, visit www.heretohelp.bc.ca

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