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Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust



CANADIAN MENTAL  
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BC DIVISION

*learn about*

# attention deficit hyperactivity disorder in adults

primer fact sheets 2010 [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca)



*Proper diagnosis  
and treatment can  
help you feel better  
and gain control of  
your life.*

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 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, is a mental disorder that 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. As we learn more about the course of ADHD, it's becoming more common for teens and adults to be diagnosed with the disorder.

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 group of symptoms is called inattention. You might have a hard time sitting still, fidget all the time or feel very restless. This group of symptoms is called hyperactivity. Or you might have a hard time controlling urges and take a lot of risks. You might

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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 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'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.

do things without considering the results or act before you think. This group of symptoms is called impulsivity. 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. 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 as a child—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. But if you are an adult and you suddenly begin to experience symptoms that look like ADHD, there is usually something else wrong.

## Why is ADHD in adults hard to diagnose?

ADHD can be harder to diagnose in adults for some of these reasons: Other mental disorders can cause problems with attention or behaviour. 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 getting better. Adults can develop coping strategies that "hide" symptoms. For example, an adult who feels very restless can choose a busy, fast-paced job or change jobs often.

## 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 disorders**—More than three-quarters of adults living with ADHD have another mental disorder. The most common mental disorders are depression, bipolar disorder, social anxiety disorder, substance use disorders and personality disorders.



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## What causes ADHD?

Researchers have found differences in brain chemicals and brain structures in people living with ADHD. The environment around you can also play a role. For example, ADHD may be seen more often in children of women who smoked cigarettes while they were pregnant.

## 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. There is a non-stimulant ADHD medication option, which is a type of antidepressant. Other types of antidepressants may also be particularly helpful for adults who have depression or an anxiety disorder in addition to ADHD.

- It's important to remember that different medications may not be a good option for all people. It's important to tell your doctor about your health conditions and health conditions in your family. For example, stimulant medications may not be a good option for people with heart, mood, sleep, anxiety or substance use problems.

**Counselling**—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 negative behaviours with positive behaviours. This may help you cope with troubling symptoms and improve your relationships with other people. It's also important to learn about ADHD. Learning about any mental disorder is usually an important 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. 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. Also, regular exercise, eating well, staying in touch with family and friends, joining a support group and doing things you enjoy are some things that help you cope with any mental disorder.

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## 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 Addictions Information

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) for the Mental Disorders Toolkit, which is full of information and tips to help you understand your mental disorder.

### Kelty Resource Centre

Contact this BC resource centre at [www.bcmhas.ca/keltyresourcecentre](http://www.bcmhas.ca/keltyresourcecentre) or 1-800-665-1822 (toll-free in BC) or 604-875-2084 (in Greater Vancouver) for information, referrals and support for children, youth and their families in all areas of mental health and addictions.

### Canadian ADHD Resource Alliance (CADDRA)

Visit [www.caddra.ca](http://www.caddra.ca) for information and resources, including the Canadian ADHD Practice Guidelines for doctors.

### Your Local Crisis Line

Crisis lines aren't only for people in crisis. You can call for information on local services or if you just need someone to talk to. If you are in distress, call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have received advanced training in mental health issues and services by members of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information.



### 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](http://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 a pharmacist about medication questions.

This fact sheet was written by the Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division. The references for this fact sheet come from reputable government or academic sources and research studies. Please contact us if you would like the footnotes for this fact sheet. Fact sheets have been vetted by clinicians where appropriate.



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HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent Anxiety Disorders Association of BC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addiction Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program, Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Addiction Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.