

UNDERSTANDING AD/HD

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Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), now referred to by clinicians as Attention-Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), is a condition that affects about 5% of American children today. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, boys are two to three times more likely to suffer from AD/HD than girls.

How do I know if my child has AD/HD? Classic signs of AD/HD include an inability to focus and a tendency to act impulsively; inappropriate levels of activity and distractibility; an inability to sit still or pay attention in class; a tendency to act “without thinking;” easily distracted by irrelevant sights and sounds; rarely follows instructions carefully and completely; often loses or forgets things; frequent fidgeting and squirming; has difficulty waiting in line or for a turn.

All kids may exhibit some of the many symptoms of AD/HD from time to time due to stress at school or at home or a developmental stage. This doesn't mean they have the disorder. The time to consult with a mental health professional is if your child's symptoms:

- Are pervasive, continuous, and exist in at least two settings (school, home, peer relationships, and in the community).
- Last for at least six months.
- Are more severe than other children in his or her same age group.



What Causes AD/HD? No one knows for sure. Recent studies indicate it is very genetic and can be exacerbated by the environment. It seems that some children may inherit a neurodevelopmental condition that can lead to AD/HD. Other children experienced abnormal fetal development and, as a result, suffered damaging effects to the parts of the brain that control attention and movement. Brain research also shows that in children with AD/HD, specific areas of the brain are 10% smaller and function with 10% less activity. It is not yet known whether this difference is a cause or an effect of the disorder.

How do you treat AD/HD? The most common treatment method involves using psychostimulants and some anti-depressants. Exactly how these medications work is unknown, but it's suspected that they help control the neurotransmitters in the brain. However, medications may have side effects, which can be related to incorrect dosage. Long-term effects of these medications are not yet known.

While medication can improve some symptoms of AD/HD (e.g. impulsive behavior and distractibility), medication is most effective when combined with behavioral treatment (e.g. using rewards instead of punishment to reinforce positive behavior, increasing home structure.) Behavioral treatment can also help children learn alternative ways to manage their emotions and cope with their AD/HD.

Is AD/HD Being Over Diagnosed? It's hard to really know, but studies show that kids are far more likely to be underdiagnosed. Every kid will act like he or she has AD/HD at times and that is a normal part of development and stress management. However, when it becomes persistent or interferes with that child's life and healthy functioning, it is a problem. Currently there is no single, reliable medical or psychological test to determine whether a child has AD/HD and should receive treatment.

To determine whether AD/HD is indeed present, proper evaluations are critical. When I evaluate a child, I begin by interviewing and providing a variety of behavioral questionnaires to the child, his/her parents and teachers.

Additionally, I administer a variety of tests to the child (e.g. intellectual, achievement, attention) and then spend time integrating all of this data (which takes three to five sessions to gather) to rule out any other conditions prior to assigning a diagnosis. My goal is to provide a holistic picture of the child's strengths, weaknesses, and learning style as well as to determine whether there is AD/HD, a learning disability, or anxiety/depression or other condition. Often times following an evaluation I will suggest a patient work with other specialists, such as a psychiatrist, developmental optometrist, audiologist, social skills group, or tutor.

Resources:

Attention Deficit Disorder Association, www.add.org
Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, www.chadd.org
New York University Child Study Center, www.aboutourkids.org
National Institute of Mental Health, www.nimh.nih.gov



What can the St. Louis Learning Disabilities Association, Inc. do for you?

- ★ Individual Consultation and Tutoring
- ★ Educational Seminars
- ★ Early Childhood Outreach
- ★ Workshops for Parent Groups, Schools, and Organizations
- ★ Information, Referrals and Resource Library
- ★ Testing

The St. Louis Learning Disabilities Association, Inc., a not-for-profit community resource, works with individuals with learning disabilities and attention deficit disorder, their families, and interested professionals.

We are committed to enhancing the understanding and education of children with learning disabilities in the St. Louis community.



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