

The UK Process for Assessing, Diagnosing & Treating ADHD in Children

Taken from www.nhs.uk

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/diagnosis/>

If you think you or your child may have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), speak to a GP.

If you're worried about your child, it may help to speak to their teachers, before seeing a GP, to find out if they have any concerns about your child's behaviour.

The GP cannot formally diagnose ADHD, but they can discuss your concerns with you and refer you for a specialist assessment, if necessary.

When you see a GP, they may ask you:

- about your symptoms or those of your child
- when these symptoms started
- where the symptoms occur – for example, at home, in school, college or university, or at work
- whether the symptoms affect your or your child's day-to-day life – for example, if they make socialising difficult
- if there have been any recent significant events in your or your child's life, such as a death or divorce in the family
- if there's a family history of ADHD
- about any other problems or symptoms of different health conditions you or your child may have

Next steps

Children and teenagers

If the GP thinks your child may have ADHD, they may first suggest a period of "watchful waiting" – lasting around 10 weeks – to see if your child's symptoms improve, stay the same or get worse.

They may also suggest starting a group-based, ADHD-focused parent training or education programme. Being offered a parent training and education programme does not mean you have been a bad parent – it aims to teach you ways of helping yourself and your child.

If your child's behaviour does not improve, and both you and the GP believe it's affecting their day-to-day life, the GP should refer you and your child to a specialist for a formal assessment.

Assessment

You or your child may be referred to 1 of the following types of specialist for a formal assessment:

- a specialist child or adult psychiatrist
- a paediatrician – a specialist in children's health
- an appropriately qualified healthcare professional with training and expertise in the diagnosis of ADHD

Who you're referred to depends on your age and what's available in your local area.

There's no simple test to determine whether you or your child has ADHD, but your specialist can make an accurate diagnosis after a detailed assessment. The assessment may include:

- a physical examination, which can help rule out other possible causes for the symptoms
- a series of interviews with you or your child
- interviews or reports from other significant people, such as partners, parents and teachers

Diagnosis in children and teenagers

Diagnosing ADHD in children depends on a set of strict criteria. To be diagnosed with ADHD, your child must have 6 or more symptoms of inattentiveness, or 6 or more symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsiveness.

To be diagnosed with ADHD, your child must also have:

- been displaying symptoms continuously for at least 6 months
- started to show symptoms before the age of 12
- been showing symptoms in at least 2 different settings – for example, at home and at school, to rule out the possibility that the behaviour is just a reaction to certain teachers or to parental control
- symptoms that make their lives considerably more difficult on a social, academic or occupational level

- symptoms that are not just part of a developmental disorder or difficult phase, and are not better accounted for by another condition

Treatment

Treatment for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) can help relieve the symptoms and make the condition much less of a problem in day-to-day life.

ADHD can be treated using medicine or therapy, but a combination of both is often best.

Treatment is usually arranged by a specialist, such as a paediatrician or psychiatrist, although the condition may be monitored by a GP.

Medication

There are 5 types of medicine licensed for the treatment of ADHD:

- methylphenidate
- lisdexamfetamine
- dexamfetamine
- atomoxetine
- guanfacine

These medicines are not a permanent cure for ADHD but may help someone with the condition concentrate better, be less impulsive, feel calmer, and learn and practise new skills.

Some medicines need to be taken every day, but some can be taken just on school days. Treatment breaks are occasionally recommended to assess whether the medicine is still needed.

If you were not diagnosed with ADHD until adulthood, a GP and specialist can discuss which medicines and therapies are suitable for you.

If you or your child is prescribed one of these medicines, you'll probably be given small doses at first, which may then be gradually increased. You or your child will need to see a GP for regular check-ups to ensure the treatment is working effectively and check for signs of any side effects or problems.

It's important to let the GP know about any side effects and talk to them if you feel you need to stop or change treatment.

Your specialist will discuss how long you should take your treatment but, in many cases, treatment is continued for as long as it is helping.

Methylphenidate

Methylphenidate is the most commonly used medicine for ADHD. It belongs to a group of medicines called stimulants, which work by increasing activity in the brain, particularly in areas that play a part in controlling attention and behaviour.

Methylphenidate may be offered to adults, teenagers and children over the age of 5 with ADHD.

The medicine can be taken as either immediate-release tablets (small doses taken 2 to 3 times a day) or as modified-release tablets (taken once a day in the morning, with the dose released throughout the day).

Common side effects of methylphenidate include:

- a small increase in blood pressure and heart rate
- loss of appetite, which can lead to weight loss or poor weight gain
- trouble sleeping
- [headaches](#)
- [stomach aches](#)
- feeling aggressive, irritable, depressed, anxious or tense

Lisdexamfetamine

Lisdexamfetamine is a medicine that stimulates certain parts of the brain. It improves concentration, helps focus attention and reduces impulsive behaviour.

It may be offered to teenagers and children over the age of 5 with ADHD if at least 6 weeks of treatment with methylphenidate has not helped.

Adults may be offered lisdexamfetamine as the first-choice medicine instead of methylphenidate.

Lisdexamfetamine comes in capsule form, taken once a day.

Common side effects of lisdexamfetamine include:

- decreased appetite, which can lead to weight loss or poor weight gain
- aggression
- drowsiness
- dizziness
- headaches
- diarrhoea
- nausea and vomiting

Dexamfetamine

Dexamfetamine is similar to lisdexamfetamine and works in the same way. It may be offered to adults, teenagers and children over the age of 5 with ADHD.

Dexamfetamine is usually taken as a tablet 2 to 4 times a day, although an oral solution is also available.

Common side effects of dexamfetamine include:

- decreased appetite
- mood swings
- agitation and aggression
- [dizziness](#)
- headaches
- [diarrhoea](#)
- nausea and vomiting

Atomoxetine

Atomoxetine works differently from other ADHD medicines.

It's a selective noradrenaline reuptake inhibitor (SNRI), which means it increases the amount of a chemical in the brain called noradrenaline.

This chemical passes messages between brain cells and increasing it can aid concentration and help control impulses.

Atomoxetine may be offered to adults, teenagers and children over the age of 5 if it's not possible to use methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine. It's also licensed for use in adults if symptoms of ADHD are confirmed.

Atomoxetine comes in capsule form, usually taken once or twice a day.

Common side effects of atomoxetine include:

- a small increase in blood pressure and heart rate
- nausea and vomiting
- stomach aches
- trouble sleeping
- dizziness
- headaches
- irritability

Atomoxetine has also been linked to some more serious side effects that are important to look out for, including suicidal thoughts and liver damage.

If either you or your child begin to feel depressed or suicidal while taking this medicine, speak to your doctor.

Guanfacine

Guanfacine acts on part of the brain to improve attention, and it also reduces blood pressure.

It may be offered to teenagers and children over the age of 5 if it's not possible to use methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine. Guanfacine should not be offered to adults with ADHD.

Guanfacine is usually taken as a tablet once a day, in the morning or evening.

Common side effects include:

- tiredness or fatigue
- headache
- abdominal pain
- dry mouth

Therapy

As well as taking medicine, different therapies can be useful in treating ADHD in children, teenagers and adults. Therapy is also effective in treating additional problems, such as conduct or anxiety disorders, that may appear with ADHD.

Here are some of the therapies that may be used.

Psychoeducation

Psychoeducation means you or your child will be encouraged to discuss ADHD and its effects. It can help children, teenagers and adults make sense of being diagnosed with ADHD, and can help you to cope and live with the condition.

Behaviour therapy

Behaviour therapy provides support for carers of children with ADHD and may involve teachers as well as parents. Behaviour therapy usually involves behaviour management, which uses a system of rewards to encourage your child to try to control their ADHD.

If your child has ADHD, you can identify types of behaviour you want to encourage, such as sitting at the table to eat. Your child is then given some sort of small reward for good behaviour.

For teachers, behaviour management involves learning how to plan and structure activities, and to praise and encourage children for even very small amounts of progress.

Parent training and education programmes

If your child has ADHD, specially tailored parent training and education programmes can help you learn specific ways of talking to your child, and playing and working with them to improve their attention and behaviour.

You may also be offered parent training before your child is formally diagnosed with ADHD.

These programmes are usually arranged in groups of around 10 to 12 parents. A programme usually consists of 10 to 16 meetings, lasting up to 2 hours each.

Being offered a parent training and education programme does not mean you have been a bad parent – it aims to teach parents and carers about behaviour management, while increasing confidence in your ability to help your child and improve your relationship.

Social skills training

Social skills training involves your child taking part in role-play situations and aims to teach them how to behave in social situations by learning how their behaviour affects others.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

[CBT](#) is a talking therapy that can help you manage your problems by changing the way you think and behave. A therapist would try to change how you or your child feels about a situation, which would in turn potentially change their behaviour.

CBT can be carried out with a therapist individually or in a group.

Other possible treatments

There are other ways of treating ADHD that some people with the condition find helpful, such as cutting out certain foods and taking supplements. However, there's no strong evidence these work, and they should not be attempted without medical advice.

Diet

People with ADHD should eat a healthy, balanced diet. Do not cut out foods before seeking medical advice.

Some people may notice a link between types of food and worsening ADHD symptoms. If this is the case, keep a diary of what you eat and drink, and what behaviour follows. Discuss this with a GP, who may refer you to a dietitian (a healthcare professional who specialises in nutrition).

Supplements

Some studies have suggested that supplements of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids may be beneficial for people with ADHD, although the evidence supporting this is very limited.

It's advisable to talk to a GP before using any supplements, because some can react unpredictably with medicine or make it less effective.

You should also remember that some supplements should not be taken long term, as they can reach dangerous levels in your body.

Tips for parents

If you're the parent of a child with ADHD:

- be sure your GP or specialist helps you understand the difference between ADHD and any other problems your child may have
- think about who else needs to know about your child's ADHD, such as their school or nursery
- find out the side effects of any medicine your child takes and what you need to look out for
- getting to know people at local support groups can stop you feeling isolated and help you to cope

The charity <https://adhduk.co.uk/> has a list of support groups across the UK, including groups for adults, parents and carers.