



## ADHD and Teens...

### What is ADHD?

ADHD is a neurological disorder. All this means is that your brain works differently. You may need help to succeed at the things you want to do or need to do, just like someone who has trouble seeing may need to wear glasses. You probably have problems with paying attention and focusing on things that you find boring or repetitive. You might even over-focus, or find it difficult to stop doing the things that you find stimulating or interesting, like watching TV and playing computer games. ADHD is really a problem with *managing your attention*, not just a problem with not being able to pay attention. ADHD has nothing to do with your intelligence level. People with ADHD are just as intelligent as anyone else.

Neurons transport information and signals in the brain. ADHD affects the flow of transmissions through the neurons. Through doing research, we know that there are certain chemicals in the brain that help with these transmissions. There seems to be a shortage of these chemicals in people with ADHD, but we are not sure why. By doing more research we hope to discover the reason for this.

We do know that one area of the brain that is affected is called the frontal lobe. As well as managing attention, this part of the brain is used for other things like: organizing, reviewing the past (hindsight), planning ahead (foresight), and trying to remember more than one thing at a time (active working memory). All of these skills are important for problem solving. We also know that the frontal lobe is in charge of things like time management (making sure that you have enough time to get things done) and social skills (learning ways to interact with your friends and grown ups). All of these things are called *executive functioning skills*. These skills are needed in order for you to get your work done well and on time. You also need these skills just to remember that you have work to do. They are just as important when you are planning where, when, and how you are going to meet your friends after school.

### How Does ADHD Affect Me?

When you are trying to pay attention, you may be more easily *distracted* by noises and other things around you than most other people. You may also find you have problems with *impulsivity*, or stopping yourself long enough to think things through before acting. This may sometimes cause you to get into trouble, but you may also be confused about why you seem to be getting into trouble. It may help to get feedback about this from someone you trust who understands about your ADHD. You might become *frustrated* more easily than others and find it harder to control your reaction to this frustration. You might lash out and say or do things that you later regret. Some people with ADHD can end up feeling that everyone else around you does not understand what you are feeling and doing. This may be true for you to some extent, especially if others do not know about ADHD. Sometimes, you can explain it to them and help them to understand. You can

learn ways to help stop yourself when you need to, so that you can make better choices and get the things that you want.

You may find that you have trouble keeping track of things and may even lose them. You may have a hard time thinking through a problem and coming up with solutions, especially when your emotions are intense. People may complain that you are too silly or not social enough. When you are given a large assignment at school you may feel overwhelmed with the amount of work, even if you are given a long time to do it. This might cause you to procrastinate, or put off starting your work, then you find yourself in trouble because you don't have enough time to get it done. You may need someone to help you break down the large project into smaller pieces so that you find it manageable. You may also need help to get started with your work. Do people complain that you do not get things done on time or that you are always late? This may be caused by a problem managing your time and being unable to accurately estimate how long something will take you to do.

ADHD does not always exhibit the same symptoms in everyone who has it. There are actually three different kinds of ADHD. One is called *Predominantly Inattentive*. You may have heard this called ADD, Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD without hyperactivity. With this type of ADHD, people have trouble regulating their attention, but not much of a problem with hyperactivity or impulsivity. Another type of ADHD is called *Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive*. This is exactly what it sounds like: people have both hyperactivity or impulsivity. Surprisingly, it's very rare. The most common type of ADHD is called *Combined*. This means that people have problems with managing their attention, their activity level, and stopping themselves from acting without thinking. Adolescents may grow out of their hyperactivity, or learn to channel it into more productive activities like sports. Adolescents and grown-ups often describe ADHD as having an internal feeling of restlessness, like your mind is always switching channels.

Another interesting thing about ADHD is that it is not always consistent. Symptoms can change a great deal. There may be minutes or hours where your attention and focus are much better, and times when it gets worse, even when you are trying your best. Unfortunately, this may make it look like you are lazy and not trying all the time. You may also find that if something really interests you, it is easier for you to pay attention. We are not sure why this is, but for some reason when people who have ADHD try and work on things that they find boring it is more difficult for them than most other people.

Since we all need to do boring things in life, there are strategies that you can learn to help with this.

## Why Me?

We know that most of the time ADHD is hereditary. This means that it is passed down to children through their parents' genes. ADHD has the same degree of hereditary as height. Chances are that if your parents are tall, you will be as well. It works the same way with ADHD. Often parents are diagnosed with ADHD after their children are diagnosed. When your parents were your age, doctors were not very good at diagnosing ADHD, and many people who had it were missed. This is why it may look like more and more people today

have ADHD, but it may be that we are just better at recognizing it. We now also know that you don't need to have hyperactivity with ADHD, so many people with the Predominantly Inattentive type are being diagnosed. In fact, many women who may not have been diagnosed with ADHD as girls, are being diagnosed as adults. This is because girls often do not have the hyperactive component that makes ADHD easier to recognize. In children, three times as many boys as girls are diagnosed, but as adults the numbers are more equal. This leads us to think that we may be missing many of the girls who have ADHD.

## How is ADHD Treated?

The treatment of ADHD should always be multimodal, which means it should be treated in more than one way. Usually we recommend *three different types of treatment*. **The first thing** that should happen is that *everyone needs to learn about ADHD*. This includes you and your parents as well as other family members. Your school should be told about your ADHD and they also need to be knowledgeable about what it is and the ways that they can help you. The more everyone understands about ADHD, the better chance you and your family have of solving any problems that may be occurring at home or at school. ADHD is not an excuse for behaving badly, or not succeeding at school, but it may help to explain why you are having these problems. It can also tell your doctors, parents, and teachers how they can help you.

**The second thing** that needs to occur is what we call "classroom accommodations". These are changes that can be made at school to help you succeed and make school less frustrating for you. One of the many accommodations that you may receive is *extra time for tests and assignments*. We know that it may take you longer to process information and get it down on paper, so it may take you longer to produce reports or write tests. This has absolutely nothing to do with your intelligence or IQ. There are many people who have ADHD that are very bright and even gifted. If you are given enough time to complete your work, you can actually show people how much you do know. Many ADHD students find it hard to listen and pay attention while having to write notes. It may be helpful to *use a computer or laptop to take notes, or to photocopy other students' or the teacher's notes*. Having assignments written down for you instead of just hearing them is great for all students, but especially good for you. You can read them over whenever you are not sure about specific details of the assignment. It also helps your tutor or parents figure out what you need to be doing. Something else that may help *is wearing headphones, maybe even listening to music while you are doing desk work*. This will shut out distracting noises around you and help you to stay focused. If you choose to, being able to work in an alternate quiet spot can also help.

There are many more things that can be done to help you at school, not only in high school, but also in post secondary schools. You do not need to feel bad about being allowed to do things differently from other kids. Just like some people need glasses to see better, or a hearing aid to hear better, you may need some of these things to work better. You are not receiving special treatment. You are just getting what you need so you can get your work done and be successful at school. It is actually your "human right" under the Canadian Charter of Rights to receive these accommodations at school. For a

full list of possible school accommodations go to [www.caddac.ca](http://www.caddac.ca) and look under School Info for “Classroom Accommodations”.

**The third thing** that may be a great help is medication. Not everyone with ADHD takes medication, but medication has been shown to help more than anything else in all the medical studies that have been done. No one wants to take medication, but medication can really help, especially with your attention and hyperactivity. If you are having a difficult time staying focused in class, you are probably missing out on a great deal of important information. We know that ADHD youth often miss out on instructions and have gaps in their learning. During the day, you may have to spend so much of your energy trying to stay focused that by the end of the day you are exhausted and miss out on the fun stuff. Some kids use their anxiety to try and control their attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. This causes them to be very tense and nervous. Even when they are trying their best, some youth can't control these things and end up getting into trouble. Medication is something that can help you work on the skills you need to improve. Medication is not magic and it won't cure your ADHD, but we do know that it will often help you to pay attention when you need to and also help you to reduce your hyperactivity. You and your parents and teachers will still need to do all the things that were discussed earlier, but medication, if you choose to take it, can help a great deal.

There are two types of medication that are most commonly used for ADHD. The type used most often is known as *stimulant medication*. There are stimulant medications that last a short time (usually about three to four hours) called Ritalin and Dexedrine. Newer stimulant medications are available that last eight to twelve hours. They are called Adderall, Biphentin, Concerta, Foquest, and Vyvanse. The other type of medication that is also used for ADHD is Strattera. This is a non-stimulant medication and may be used if you have problems with anxiety or if your doctor thinks that it will be more suitable for you. There are also other medications that are not used for ADHD as often, but may also be of help.

Medications can have some side effects. Some of the medications used for ADHD may have short-term side effects that go away after your body gets used to them. There are more choices in medication these days and your doctor will work with you to find the right medication and the correct dose that works the best for you, with the least amount of side effects. Adolescent girls may need to adjust their dose according to their hormone cycle.

## How Can I Help With My Treatment?

The very best way to help with your treatment is to *learn about ADHD*. When you understand what ADHD is and how it affects you, you can start to learn strategies to help deal with it. ADHD affects everyone differently and it is important to understand not only the things that may be causing you problems but also the things that you are good at. ADHD is something that causes weaknesses in specific areas, but everyone has weaknesses in one area or another. Everyone also has strengths, and it is important to use your strengths and assets to learn strategies and coping skills to deal with problems that arise due to your ADHD.

Also remember, not all your problems are caused by your ADHD, and many of your strengths may be a result of your ADHD. There are many successful adults with ADHD who attribute their success directly to their high energy level and their innovative way of thinking. Some people find the skill of being able to over-focus very valuable in their job. Many people with ADHD are highly creative and good at thinking outside of the box. Everyone is suited to a different type of career, and this is especially true for people with ADHD.

There are many successful people who have ADHD. When we asked these people what helped them to succeed, many reported that getting into a field or a job that they found interesting and stimulating made all the difference. People with ADHD know that doing things they find boring can be very difficult, yet time seems to fly for them when they are interested in what they are doing. Unfortunately, you may need to spend some time doing those boring things before you get to do the exciting stuff.

You can also help with your treatment by trying to keep an open mind. Some of the things that people suggest may sound strange or seem like they will never work, but sometimes trying different things is the only way to find out what works for you.

## What About School, My Job, Friends?

You may feel that you don't want anyone at school or your job to know you have ADHD. This is not uncommon. We don't like others knowing we have problems or things we find difficult. As you get older and meet more people, you will find that everyone has things that they are good at and things that they find difficult.

Your school definitely needs to know about your ADHD or else they will not be able to help by providing accommodations for you. They will also be more likely to understand why you might be having problems with getting your work in on time, forgetting your work and belongings at home or at school, acting or speaking impulsively, not being able to focus in class, and needing extra time to do tests and assignments.

ADHD is a part of you. Your friends already like you for being you. They probably like you for some of the things that may go along with ADHD – like your high energy level, your spontaneity, your creativeness, or your sense of humor. If they are your friends, they won't stop liking you just because they find out you have ADHD. In fact, if you can help them to understand you better, your relationships may even improve.

## Will My ADHD Ever Go Away?

ADHD is something that can continue into your adulthood. You may see a change in some of your symptoms, like a decrease in hyperactivity, but we know that at least 50% of ADHD children keep their core symptoms as adults. The good news is that by taking advantage of the treatment available, you will be able to learn strategies to help you work with your ADHD. Many people with ADHD grow up to have successful careers and happy lives, and there is no reason why this won't happen to you. The important thing is that you learn as much as you can about yourself and ADHD, stick with your treatment, and don't let your ADHD stop you from succeeding at what you want to do.