

Health Information Sheet

Managing the Child with ADHD

Attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is the name for a group of behaviors found in many children and adults. People with ADHD have a pattern of inattention (lack of attention or regard) or hyperactivity (excessive activity) that is worse and more frequent than what is considered usual for their age group. Many children with ADHD are both inattentive and hyperactive/impulsive. It is a common disorder that affects one in every 20 children, and it is more common in boys than in girls. The child with ADHD who is inattentive will have six or more of the following symptoms:

- Has difficulty following instructions
- Has difficulty keeping attention on work or play activities at school and at home
- Loses things needed for activities at school and at home
- Appears not to listen
- Doesn't pay close attention to details
- Seems disorganized
- Has trouble with tasks that require planning ahead
- Forgets
- Is easily distracted

The child with ADHD who is hyperactive/impulsive will have at least six of the following symptoms:

- Fidgety
- Is always on the go
- Can't stay in seat
- Blurts out answers
- Runs or climbs inappropriately
- Has trouble waiting turn
- Talks too much
- Interrupts people
- Can't play quietly

What causes ADHD?

People used to think that ADHD was the result of some type of brain damage. We now know that the brain structure of children with ADHD is normal, but the chemistry in the brain isn't normal. This may be a genetic problem. Children with ADHD do not make enough chemicals in key areas in the brain that are responsible for organizing. Without enough of these chemicals, the organizing centers of the brain don't work well. This causes the symptoms seen in children with ADHD.

ADHD isn't caused by bad parenting, but a disorganized home life and school environment can make the symptoms worse. ADHD isn't caused by a diet that contains too much sugar, too little sugar or aspartame (NutraSweet). It isn't caused by food additives, food colorings, food allergies or other allergies, or a lack of vitamins. It also isn't caused by too much television, fluorescent lighting or video games.

What can I do to help my child with ADHD?

A team effort, with parents, school officials and doctors working together, is the best way to help your child. Medicine helps many children, and some children may need counseling. Ask your doctor what treatment he or she recommends.

How can I help my child at home?

Children with ADHD may be difficult to parent. They may have trouble understanding important directions. Children with ADHD are usually in a constant state of activity. This can be a challenge to adults. You may need to change your home life a bit to help your child. Here are some things you can do to help:

- Organize your schedule at home. Set up specific times for waking up, eating, playing, doing homework, doing chores, watching TV or playing video games and going to bed. Write the schedule on a blackboard or a piece of paper and hang it where your child will always see it. If your child can't read yet, use drawings or symbols to show the activities of each day. Explain any changes in routine in advance. Make sure your child understands the changes.
- Set up house rules. Make the rules of behavior for the family simple, clear and short. Rules should be explained clearly. It's important to explain what will happen when the rules are obeyed and when they are broken. Write down the rules and the results of not following them. Hang this list next to the schedule. The punishment for breaking rules should be fair, quick and consistent.
- Be positive. Tell your child what you want rather than what you don't want. Reward your child regularly for any good behavior— even little things such as getting dressed and closing doors quietly. Children with ADHD often spend most of their day being told what they are doing wrong. They need to be praised for good behavior.
- Make sure your directions are understood. First, get your child's attention. Look directly into his or her eyes. Then tell your child in a clear, calm voice specifically just what you want. Ask your child to repeat the directions back to you. It's usually better to keep directions simple and short. For difficult tasks, give only one or two directions at a time. Then congratulate your child when he or she completes each step.
- Be consistent. Only promise what you will deliver. Do what you say you are going to do. Repeating directions and requests many times doesn't work well. When your child breaks the rules, warn only once in a quiet voice. If the warning does not work, follow through with the punishment that you promised.
- Make sure someone watches your child all the time. Because they are impulsive, children with ADHD need more adult supervision than other children their age. Make sure your child is supervised by adults all day.
- Watch your child around his or her friends. It's hard for children with ADHD to learn social skills and social rules. Be careful to select playmates for your child with similar language and physical skills. Invite only one or two friends at a time at first. Watch them closely while they play. Reward good play behaviors often. Most of all,

don't allow hitting, pushing and yelling in your house or yard.

- Help with school activities. School mornings may be difficult for children with ADHD. Get ready the night before—lay out school clothes and get the book bag ready. Allow enough time for your child to get dressed and eat a good breakfast. If your child is really slow in the mornings, it's important to make enough time to dress and eat.
- Set up a homework routine. Pick a regular place for doing homework. This place should be away from distractions such as other people, television and video games. Break homework time into small parts and have breaks. For example, give your child a snack after school and then let him or her play for a few minutes. Then start homework time. Stop frequently for short "fun breaks" that allow your child to do something enjoyable. Give your child lots of encouragement, but let your child do the school work.
- Focus on effort, not grades. Reward your child when he or she tries to finish school work, not just for good grades. You can give extra rewards for earning better grades.
- Talk with your child's teachers. Find out how your child is doing at school—in class, at playtime, at lunchtime. Ask for daily or weekly progress notes from the teacher. These notes should include good things and not so good things. Consider getting an extra set of schoolbooks for home. Find out the teacher's lesson plans in advance, so you can work with your child at home.

Will my child outgrow ADHD?

We used to think children would "grow out" of ADHD. We now know that is not true for most children. Children with ADHD get better as they grow older. Many learn to adjust for their problems. Hyperactivity usually stops in the late teenage years. But about half of children with ADHD continue to be easily distracted, with wide mood swings, hot tempers and an inability to complete tasks. Children with loving, supportive parents who work together with school staff, mental health specialists and their doctor have the best chance of becoming well-adjusted adults.