

# Adult ADHD



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Think Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is kid stuff? If so, you'll be surprised to learn that an estimated one adult in 20 struggles with the condition, too, according to a 2006 study published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*.<sup>1</sup> However, many of these people are unaware they have it—a mere 10% get treatment.<sup>1</sup> The face of ADHD isn't just the squirmy seven-year-old who can't pay attention in class; it's also the dreamy-eyed university student who can't get her work in on time, the brainy 35-year-old who ends up buried in a janitorial job after failing at his chosen career because of chronic lateness and poor work performance, and the twice-divorced 40-year-old lawyer whose life comes apart at the seams when his BlackBerry breaks. Yet another face of ADHD is the successful business person whose symptoms stand in the way of reaching even greater heights: the talented sales rep who can't move up the career ladder because he's always jumping from job to job, or the investment banker who's a whiz at making deals, but can't make partner because paperwork is problematic.

Some of these people were diagnosed with ADHD and successfully treated as kids, only to stop treatment as teens, when their problems with restlessness and impulsive behaviour began to diminish. Others have reached adulthood without realizing undetected ADHD is the reason they use up every ounce of their energy

just getting through a workday. Still, more adults only discover ADHD lies at the root of their own disorganization, relationship issues and employment problems when one of their own children is diagnosed. That's because ADHD isn't a willpower problem but a brain disorder that tends to run in families. In fact, inherited factors seem to play a role in about 75% of cases.<sup>2-4</sup> Simply put, in someone with ADHD, the brain's management system doesn't work quite the way it should. Sometimes, as a person grows and matures, that malfunction corrects itself—but just as often, it doesn't.

So why does adult ADHD so often go undetected? A big part of the problem is that the condition often shows itself differently as children grow to adulthood. Since symptoms like hyperactivity and impulsiveness tend to fade with age, the vast majority of adults with ADHD suffer primarily from problems with attention, concentration and organization. This is one reason why ADHD was once thought to disappear in adolescence, though recent research indicates only 40 to 50% of people with the condition will truly outgrow it.<sup>5,6</sup>

Then there's the fact that the condition isn't always easy to spot, even in childhood. For example, about 20 to 30% of children with ADHD don't fit the classic 'ants-in-the-pants' profile - they're quiet, daydreaming kids (often girls) whose poor grades get written off to

laziness. ADHD symptoms can also be overshadowed by those of other mental health issues that often go hand in hand with it—depression, anxiety disorders and alcohol abuse, just to name a few. For instance, approximately 25% of people with ADHD are also depressed.<sup>7</sup> In other cases, someone with ADHD might cope well during childhood thanks to family support, hitting the wall only when the demands of college or university prove overwhelming. Then there are those individuals who manage to succeed in school and at work, but suffer in other areas of their lives because they spend an incredible amount of time and effort compensating for their concentration problems.

Whatever the reasons ADHD is missed, it can take a tremendous toll when it goes untreated. In effect, living with untreated ADHD is like trying to run a race with a 50-pound pack strapped to your back. Problems like low frustration threshold and the stress of caring for a child who also has ADHD can strain marriages. In one survey, having ADHD seemed to double the odds of separation and divorce.<sup>8</sup> Many people with ADHD also ‘self-medicate’ with alcohol, cigarettes or other drugs, boosting their chances of developing substance abuse problems.<sup>9</sup> Inattention also makes people with untreated ADHD more accident-prone: for example, the condition increases the odds of being involved in a car crash two-to four-fold.<sup>10,11</sup>

Other effects are more subtle. Take the fact that many teens with ADHD, about 35%, drop out rather than struggle through school.<sup>12</sup> That means they’re more likely to end up in dead-end jobs, or at least not realize their full potential. Work performance also suffers: according to a 2005 paper published in the *Journal of Occupational & Environmental Medicine*, people with ADHD averaged the equivalent of 35 fewer days of production per year than workers without the condition.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, individuals who’ve managed to achieve a great deal may also have the most to lose—careless mistakes cost a lot more if you’re an accountant who’s responsible for millions of dollars than they do if you’re a drummer in a rock band.

But enough doom and gloom. Just as researchers have broadened their understanding of just how

common the disease is, and how deeply it can affect people’s lives, they have also discovered just how treatable ADHD really is. In combination with non-medical therapies, anti-ADHD medications are highly effective. In fact, about 85% of the time, medication can either substantially reduce symptoms or get rid of them entirely.<sup>14-17</sup> To try and understand just how big a difference that can make in someone’s life, let’s imagine you’re still bent down under that 50-pound pack—and someone comes along and either lightens the load to about seven pounds, or lifts it off your shoulders entirely and casts it aside.

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