



ADHD & Coexisting Disorders in Adults





Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in adults is a recognized medical condition that often requires medical intervention.¹ Establishing a diagnosis of ADHD in adulthood is complex and requires a careful history that looks for signs going back to childhood.¹ Adding to the difficulty of diagnosing ADHD is that it is often accompanied by other coexisting conditions¹: it is estimated that as many as 77% of adults with ADHD may have at least one coexisting condition.²

When two different diagnoses are present within the same patient at the same time, the diseases or illnesses are said to be comorbid. A significant proportion of adults with ADHD may have one or more coexisting conditions, such as^{1,3}:

- ▶ Learning disorders
- ▶ Anxiety disorders
- ▶ Mood disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder)
- ▶ Substance use disorders

In addition to treating the symptoms of ADHD, you may require medication and/or counselling to help control the symptoms of any coexisting disorder(s).¹



LEARNING DISORDERS

ADHD is not a learning disability, but rates of learning disabilities that coexist with ADHD have been reported in the range of 40 to 70% in children.¹ Both disorders can cause problems in school, and they may continue to cause difficulties into adult life.¹ Specialized testing can also help differentiate between attention problems and specific learning issues.¹ By adulthood, some may have developed coping strategies (such as keyboarding instead of writing), but special accommodations and coaching may also be helpful in dealing with learning problems.¹

ANXIETY DISORDERS

The findings of a recent study have shown that by their young adult years, youth with ADHD were at high risk for a range of psychiatric disorders, including increased rates of anxiety disorders.⁴ Indeed, about 50% of adults with ADHD also have some form of anxiety disorder (social anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder) (see glossary).^{3,5} People with anxiety disorders may have extreme feelings of fear, worry or panic, experience obsessions or compulsions or suffer from nightmares.⁶ Counselling and/or medication may be needed to treat anxiety disorders in their own right.¹



MOOD DISORDERS

People with ADHD are also more likely to suffer from a mood disorder (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder): in a recent study, 38% of adults with ADHD had a major mood disorder, compared to 11% of adults without ADHD.³

Depression

The study mentioned above found that about 18% of adults with ADHD suffered from major depression.³ People with attention problems may often have to deal with failure and may become demoralized or depressed as a result.¹ Similarly to ADHD, patients who are depressed may have trouble eating, sleeping, and concentrating; the difference is that people who are depressed tend to have a consistently negative mood.¹ People with depression often require a different type of medication than those normally used to treat ADHD.¹

Bipolar disorder

The majority of children with bipolar disorder also have ADHD,⁷ and adults with ADHD have been found to have much higher rates of bipolar disorder — 19%, compared to 3% in people without ADHD.³ Differentiating between bipolar disorder and ADHD can be a challenge since they have many overlapping symptoms, but a new and sudden onset of increased energy, irritability and



decreased need to sleep may be a signal of mania, since ADHD develops over the long term.¹

SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Adults with undiagnosed ADHD have two to three times the risk of developing a substance abuse problem, including marijuana use, alcoholism, smoking, and other drug use.^{3,8}

SUMMARY

Comorbid disorders frequently occur in adults with ADHD¹ and it is critical to identify these conditions so that they can be effectively treated. Talk to your doctor if you think you may also have a comorbid disorder.



GLOSSARY

Obsessive compulsive disorder is a condition involving obsessions (persistent, often irrational, and seemingly uncontrollable thoughts) and compulsions (actions or “rituals” that are used to neutralize the obsessions).⁹

Social anxiety disorder is a persistent fear of social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or scrutiny by others.⁹

Post-traumatic stress disorder involves the development of characteristic symptoms after a traumatic event. People may have intense fear and helplessness, or relive the event over and over.⁹





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FOR MORE INFORMATION

There are many reliable sources of information on ADHD. A good place to start is:

- ▶ www.caddra.ca (The Canadian Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Resource Alliance)
- ▶ www.ldac-acta.ca (The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada)
- ▶ www.chaddcanada.org (Children and Adults with A.D.D.)

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