

# ADULTS AND ADHD

ADHD  
samtökin



# WHAT IS ADHD

ADHD is an internationally valid psychiatric diagnosis and stands for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. ADHD is a deficit in neural development that leads to a situation where the brain regions in the frontal part of the brain develop slower and/or less than is considered the norm in similar age groups. The condition expresses itself very differently in different individuals and has unique impact on each person's everyday life. Nowadays it is widely accepted that ADHD is connected to a disorder in neural activity in the frontal regions of the brain, which leads to a situation where the neural terminals cannot transmit synapses between each other as they normally do. In other words, these parts of the reticular formation in the brain are not working properly.

Until recently it was often differentiated between ADHD and ADD, whereas ADD is an attention deficit without hyperactivity. It is now known that beneath ADD and ADHD lies the same neural disorder. It simply differs between individuals whether they show symptoms of physical hyperactivity or not.

Many people think that ADHD expresses itself only in children and teenagers, and parents were often told that it was just a matter of time when children with ADHD would grow out of the ADHD symptoms. The common view at that time was that with increased development of the brain the ADHD symptoms would simply vanish. Today we have proof to the contrary; far from all children will grow out of their ADHD symptoms when they reach an adult age.

It is important to keep in mind that ADHD is first and foremost a natural disorder, not a disease, although in some cases people speak about ADHD as if it were a disease and/or about patients with ADHD.

## RESEARCH ON ADULTS WITH ADHD SHOWS THAT:

- ADHD symptoms are found among adults; however, the symptoms can change with age and increased maturity, both physically and socially (e.g. from hyperactivity to internal uneasiness).
- Most adults with ADHD will have had from a young age, difficulties with concentration, impulsiveness, and hyperactivity, but it is different how much impact these symptoms have on daily life.
- Medicines have proven to be very useful for adults with ADHD.

## ADHD SYMPTOM

During recent years ADHD has been classified into three main groups depending on the presentation of symptoms

- ADHD — with dominant attention deficit
- ADHD — with dominant increased impulsivity and hyperactivity
- ADHD — mixed type with attention deficit, increased impulsivity and hyperactivity



# ADHD IN ADULTS

Just like in children, ADHD in adults can express itself very differently depending on different individuals. The symptoms of ADHD can create considerable difficulties in daily life. Although many symptoms are common, they can differ from one individual to the next. Not all adults with ADHD have the symptoms described here, however most of them will probably recognise a few of them.

## Hyperactivity

Described as a lot of physical uneasiness and very little ability to relax. You may have difficulty in concentrating enough to be able to watch a whole movie, need frequent bathroom breaks or go out for a smoke. You may frequently run into serious problems because you often act before thinking.

**“I do not understand how people can watch a whole movie without being on the computer at the same time”**

## Concentration

Symptoms of attention deficit can express themselves in the state of being distracted easily and not able to filter external stimuli. Difficulties in concentrating can also arise when solving projects, and the mind starts to roam. Keys, papers, bags and clothes can vanish or be lost. You forget about meetings/appointments and even forget what you were going to say and have difficulties to keep in context during conversations.

**“I feel very important to ... wait, where did I leave my phone ... what was I about to say?”**

## Impulsive

You are impulsive, i.e. you speak before you think, disturb other people's conversations, are impatient while driving your car, cannot wait in a queue and buy things on impulse. You take risks before you consider possible consequences, for example you drive too fast, or start a financial obligation

without thinking things through. This can also be described as feeling bad if you don't have the opportunity to react immediately in stressful situations; you make decisions on the spot when you really need more information and need to think things through. This can increase your difficulties.

**“I bought the car on a special car loan, but I forgot to take the monthly instalment into the home bookkeeping”**

### **Organizing**

Difficulties with keeping things in order and setting goals can impact all parts of your daily life. You may have difficulties in seeing things in an overall perspective, disorder and chaos can result both at work and in the home. That leads to chaos in your life. Lax time management is more often to blame here – you know that time passes but have difficulties in estimating how much time it takes to execute a job and perceive how much time has passed. Due to this, individuals with ADHD tend to arrive too late, miss deadlines or take more on than they can deliver.

**“I do not understand people who can do things right away. It took me 1 ½ years to get rid of the old washing machine”**

### **Mood swings**

Individuals with ADHD often show strong emotional reactions. They tend to live in the now, which can lead to mood swings becoming stronger than normal. Difficulties in concentrating and focusing cause you to have less stamina than others. A lot of your energy is spent on tasks which other people consider easy, but in your mind become insurmountable. The repercussions of this can be irritation and mood swings which other people find difficult to understand. Sometimes individuals with ADHD are even generalised as being hot tempered, for mood swings can appear suddenly and seemingly out of the blue. More often than not related to something in the environment, such as social difficulties.

**“I can completely lose my temper, especially if I have to wait in a long row of cars. I just can't take it!”**

## Communication

The symptoms of ADHD can cause difficulties in communication with family and friends. Many different factors are at play here, for instance mood swings, impulsiveness and a lack of patience. These symptoms can cause you to change your lodgings often and have difficulties in maintaining close relationships, family relationships and friendships. The basis for good communication is that the person can read communication, both verbalized messages and physical expression. This can be very difficult for you, especially if you cannot maintain your focus when communicating. If in addition, you feel that you are unable to express your talents, that you are different from everyone else, that can have a very strong impact on your idea of self-worth and faith in your own capabilities.

**“It is very difficult for me to maintain friendships and I often forget that I have to contribute to the relationship – my friends get the feeling that I am simply not there, even over long periods of time.”**

## Things that cannot be seen

Many difficulties that ADHD-individuals must deal with cannot be seen. On the surface ADHD- individuals are powerful, lively, fun to have around and full of ideas. However, difficulties can cause problems in daily lives, especially when you must explain why you cannot do even simple things that everybody else find easy to do. The result can be, that an individual with ADHD is considered “somewhat retarded.” While however, the real cause is the environment and other people in social situations wrongly assume that all people think alike. Research shows that ADHD causes some very real problems, when you have difficulties using and expressing your gifts and talents. It is not uncommon that ADHD-individuals have less education than their peers, they change jobs more frequently and have a lower income over their whole lifetime compared to other people. Another side to this is that if you have ADHD, you almost never praise yourself for your accomplishments, even when you exceeded your peers by far.

**“Others say that I am fun to have around and seem to have everything under control. Inside me however, everything is in chaos. I am stressed and irritated over being unable to finish a single project.”**



# BENEFITS OF ADHD

ADHD has many positive aspects. Individuals with ADHD are exceptionally gifted which can make them an asset in many areas of life. Be proud of being an individual with ADHD and grow and develop your strengths. By facing challenges, you develop inner strength, resourcefulness, resilience and determination.

- **Super concentration.** You have an exceptional ability to focus on whatever is awakening your interest.
- **Resilience.** You are an expert in confronting and adapting to new circumstances. You never give up, even though you may be facing enormous challenges.
- **An entertaining personality.** You radiate joy and warmth. You are an individual other people love to be around.
- **Generosity.** You do not mind sharing things with those you love, and generous with your time and effort in general.
- **Unafraid of the risks.** Impulsiveness, a penchant for novelty and curiosity are characteristics of individuals with ADHD. Those talents make you dare to try something new and exciting.
- **The unexpected.** You are a real genius in dealing with any unexpected turn of events.
- **Impulsiveness.** You test new things without thinking twice where it might lead you. Sudden and new ideas turn into reality and you experience new things.
- **Romance.** You are warm and honest, and generous on hugs and beautiful words.
- **Conversation.** A bright and fast thinking mind can often lead to new and exciting discussions. You are dead honest and forthright, which allows you to get to know new people quickly.
- **Compassion.** You have great compassion and a sense of righteousness. You support those who are in difficulties and do magnificent things for those you love.
- **Not giving up.** You do not let anything stop you in fulfilling your dreams and desires.
- **Creativity.** You never lack ideas, which combined with an unusual way of thinking and strength helps you to develop your talents.
- **A new viewpoint.** You have a gift of seeing things from unusual points of view. Often you can solve problems and bring forth ideas and solutions that no one else has even considered.



## HOW ADHD EXPRESSES ITSELF IN ADULTS

It is not clear how many children with ADHD still show symptoms as adults. Research indicates that the ratio is as high as 50-70%. However, it is difficult to say anything definite yet.

If we assume that around 8-10% of children have ADHD, then you can draw the conclusion from that, that around 5% of adults will show symptoms of ADHD and that a part of that group will have difficulties in daily life that can be traced back to ADHD. Research indicates that the incidence of ADHD should be the same in both genders, which indicates that a lack of diagnosis may be prominent among women.

Just as with other disorders of psychiatric nature, there are no direct biological, genetic nor neurological tests to test for ADHD. Instead, ADHD diagnose process is based on a detailed assessment of the individual's difficulties as far back as possible, along with a neurological and psychological examination. At the same time other factors are considered, such as diseases, trauma which can cause ADHD-like symptoms and are therefore considered excluding criteria, unless the ADHD-symptoms can be traced all the way back before the trauma took place.

It is probably safe to assert that ADHD amongst adults is still an underdiagnosed condition. This is because diagnostic criteria are different and furthermore because other disorders can mask ADHD during diagnosis, when factors such as anxiety, depression are being diagnosed, concurrently with alcohol or substance abuse. The fact remains that all those things can be a consequence of having ADHD without having received a proper diagnosis and lack of treatment.

## THE CAUSES OF ADHD

ADHD is a disruption in human neurological development and all research indicates that the causes of ADHD are to be found in the dopamine system in the frontal regions of the brain, which play a large part in regulation of human behaviour. Neurological research in adults with ADHD show that their difficulties are similar to those faced by ADHD-children.

We know that ADHD is mostly connected to genes and heredity, that is, in a family of individuals with ADHD there is an increased risk of more relatives being found with ADHD.

# ADULTHOOD

Science is still lacking in knowledge and understanding of ADHD in adults, and still does not comprehend the impact ADHD has on the daily lives of individuals. Most research today deals with children or young adults with ADHD. Knowledge is sorely lacking regarding how ADHD impacts those who are middle aged or elderly.

Equally important though, is to emphasise how those very same ADHD symptoms can manifest as a strength or ability for many people –more knowledge, understanding and education is needed to allow the strengths of ADHD to bloom so that individuals with ADHD can fully participate in society as a whole.

Grown-ups with ADHD are more likely to have to have to deal with mental issues, such as anxiety, social phobias, depression, manic-depressive disorder, and various personality disorders. In many cases these mental issues are the consequence of undiagnosed and/or untreated ADHD. Other mental issues and disorders may be hereditary, which in turn can increase the risk for individuals with ADHD developing them.

During teenage years, individuals with ADHD are in increased danger of misuse of alcohol, tobacco and other substances. The same goes for adults with ADHD, even though the risk diminishes somewhat with increasing age. Research has shown different results. However, it is clear, that in the group that seeks help due to serious addiction problems there is a high percentage with ADHD. This indicates that there is a relationship between ADHD



symptoms and increased risk of addictive behaviour. Furthermore, it has been shown that some individuals use alcohol and substances as a form of self-medication.

The relationship between ADHD-individuals and crime is disputed. However, research shows that young individuals are at a greater risk regarding crime, and research on convicts shows that an increased number of them have ADHD symptoms without having ever been diagnosed.

Having ADHD does not necessarily mean that you are headed for serious obstacles later in life. If anything, it seems that personality disorders can have a more negative impact if they are concurrent – both in children and adults. Overall however, grown-ups with ADHD can roughly be divided into two different groups. On one side those who received diagnosis and/or treatment at an early age and are no more likely than the norm of running into difficulties, and on the other side those who only receive their diagnosis and possibly treatment later in life.

Grown-up individuals with ADHD wishing to receive diagnosis, can turn to a psychologist or psychiatrists. A psychiatrist is needed if medical treatment is to be considered. The ADHD-team at Landspítali (The National University Hospital of Iceland) is another alternative, after referral from a medical professional such as a general practitioner.

Unfortunately, Iceland has for long suffered severe shortage of specialists and medical professionals with knowledge of ADHD, thus proving difficult for adults to receive a diagnosis and treatment if needed.



# TREATMENT AND SUPPORT

Grown-ups with ADHD often need understanding and support. Here the most important thing is what impact ADHD has on each individual's daily life. It is only natural to consider medical treatment of ADHD or other accepted methods, but support from family and friends and not forgetting the importance of educating oneself on the issue, can be just as important. Simple things matter such as:

- Reglulega hreyfingu
- Regular exercise
- Help with planning
- Retain routine
- Keeping everything in order at home
- Getting help with finances
- Planning and creating habits in work/study and daily life
- Help with social interaction and hobbies

## Acknowledgement and acceptance

To admit to yourself that ADHD is an inseparable part of your life has proved difficult for many people. However, doing so is the key to a better existence. Your brain simply works this way, but not the other. To seek information and attend courses, can be a good option. Also, to educate your family, friends and colleagues, either yourself or on their own terms. With increased knowledge of ADHD, you get insight into how ADHD affects your life as well as getting an opportunity to use the changes that are inherent in your own situation.

## Healthy Lifestyle

You need to regulate your sleep, nourish yourself and exercise daily. Such habits help you in daily life. Many articles and research papers recommending a certain diet as a treatment or even a cure for ADHD exist, but only a handful are based accepted research results that have been reviewed. However, a healthy lifestyle along with daily exercise can go a long way in creating a better life for you and those around you.

## Cooperation

Meeting others that are dealing with similar challenges and to be able to share life experiences is an important part of gaining a richer life with ADHD. You are not alone. It can be invaluable to belong to a group which understands what you are going through, what kind of challenges you meet, and which does not judge you. Such groups can give you inspiration and ideas. The experiences of others often give you a new insight on things and you realise how you can work with your own ADHD.

The ADHD Association regularly offers meetings for parents of children with ADHD and for grown-ups with ADHD. Furthermore, more digital material is available every day, for instance through streaming, and recordings of all kinds.

Information on this can be found on the website of the ADHD Association **[adhd.is](http://adhd.is)**

## Training

Some treatment coping strategies involve training in using talents and meeting difficulties, for instance with cognitive therapy, supporting interviews or ADHD coaching. Using this kind of help makes you capable of addressing things that can otherwise hinder you in living a rich and rewarding life. For some people discussing with a psychologist or a psychiatrist is the only correct way of dealing with the diagnosis, by working with self-respect and the negative emotions that arise when living with ADHD.



## ADHD medicines

Medical treatment for ADHD delivers the best results for most people and has changed the lives of many. Medication gives the frontal brain regions a longer time span to utilize brain neurotransmitters which are necessary for neural messages to reach the neurons. This facilitates normal functioning in the frontal regions of the brain and diminishes the main symptoms of ADHD. Thus, medical treatment can help you to execute certain functions and at the same time allow you to sort out the clutter and chaos that may have accumulated over the years. In the low dosage recommended by doctors, ADHD medicines do not change your personality or mind, but you may have to adjust to some changes, and may need some support while that is taking place.

Just as with other medicines, adverse reactions can result from taking them, and often it takes some time to find the correct medicine and dosage. During this process, you may need to show some patience and follow instructions of your medical practitioner. It can happen that adverse side effects rule out medical treatment of any sort. Also, some people choose not to take medicines.

Medical treatment for ADHD first and foremost helps you to address issues encountered in daily life. Therefore, medical treatment should never be the only option, combining many options will greatly improve the outcome. This can for example be cognitive therapy, interviews with a psychologist and/or to work with an ADHD coach.

**“It took me some time before I found out what works for me. Some things I discovered myself, other I read about. An important part of the whole process was realising I needed help.”**



## DID YOU KNOW

- That 5% of grown-ups are considered to have ADHD
- That most grown-ups with ADHD have not been diagnosed
- That ADHD treatment for adults exists just as for any other age group



**Authors:** Elín H. Hinriksdóttir  
& Vilhjálmur Hjálmarsson

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**ADHD** samtökin

Háaleitisbraut 13  
108 Reykjavík

[www.adhd.is](http://www.adhd.is)  
[adhd@adhd.is](mailto:adhd@adhd.is)