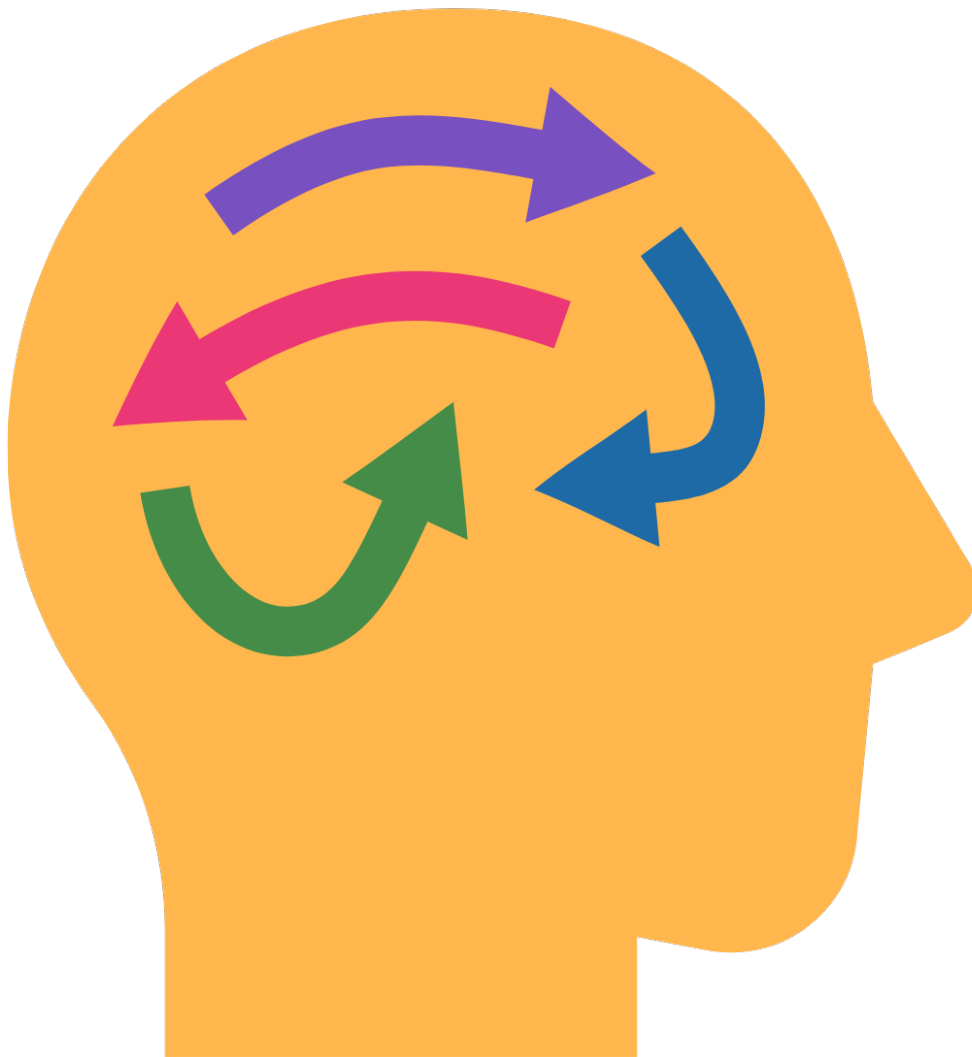


# What is ADHD?



## Key Points

- **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects children and adults.**
- **ADHD is characterised by three diagnostic symptoms: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity.**
- **ADHD is also associated with emotional regulation issues.**



ADHD stands for 'Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' and it is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects both children and adults. It is characterised by three diagnostic symptoms: inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity, and issues around emotional regulation.

The name 'Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder' isn't great, as it conjures images of people who have less attention, are physically hyperactive and it doesn't even mention emotions. We don't have less attention; we just often struggle to allocate our attention to tasks we want to or switching our attention from one task to another. Also, for many adults with ADHD, being hyperactive isn't an external thing, it's more about being internally restless, like you are 'driven by a motor'. Equally, the name doesn't even mention emotions. Not everyone with ADHD has issues with attention, not everyone has issues with hyperactivity or impulsivity, but pretty much all of us have some form of issue with managing our emotions.

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental disorder, which means that there are differences in the brains of people with ADHD when compared to the brains of people without ADHD. No one knows exactly why this happens, but ADHD is highly genetic, and it is thought to affect between 2-5% of all adults.

As brains develop throughout childhood, the areas which control attention, inhibition (or stopping ourselves from saying, thinking, or doing things), emotions, and higher-level thinking skills known as 'executive functions' develop a little differently.

Also, the connections between these areas of the brain don't grow as strongly as the connections in the brains of people without ADHD.

There are also differences in the activity of the chemicals used to help the brain areas communicate too. These chemicals are called 'neurotransmitters' and they pass signals from neuron to neuron, allowing the brain to function effectively. The neurotransmitters thought to be less active in ADHD include dopamine and noradrenaline, and possibly others. This lack of normal neurotransmitter activity contributes to the brain working slightly differently in ADHD.

ADHD is a lifelong disorder. That means it is with us from childhood, and there currently isn't a cure. There are two diagnostic sides to ADHD: inattention, and hyperactivity and impulsivity. The common symptoms of ADHD may therefore include the following:

Attention problems can include:

- Being easily distracted
- Having difficulty planning or organising tasks,
- Starting new tasks or hobbies with lots of enthusiasm, but rarely finishing them.
- Being daydreamy and forgetful and procrastinating

Hyperactivity can present in the following ways:

- Inner restlessness, or agitation
- Difficulty relaxing

- Fidgeting
- Talking too much and too loudly

Impulsiveness, which diagnostically is included with hyperactivity, often presents in the following ways:

- Being impatient
- Acting without thinking
- Interrupting conversations or finishing other people's sentences
- Entering or breaking off jobs or relationships frequently

There are three 'presentations' of ADHD, based on these symptoms. The most common form is 'combined type ADHD', accounting for around 50-70% of all cases in adults. People with this presentation, like me, have includes issues with both attention and hyperactivity or impulsivity.

Secondly, we have 'predominantly inattentive type ADHD'. This presentation is more specifically associated with trouble paying attention, an inability to focus on unrewarding tasks, and making careless mistakes. Around 30% of adults with ADHD are predominantly inattentive.

Finally, we have predominantly hyperactive/impulsive type ADHD. Adults with this subtype don't have strong issues with attention, but are often internally hyperactive or restless, and act impulsively. This is the least common presentation of ADHD, accounting for less than 10% of adult ADHD cases.

The full list of diagnostic symptoms is below:

### **Nine Symptoms of Inattention**

1. Making careless mistakes/lacking attention to detail
2. Difficulty sustaining attention.
3. Inability sometimes to listen when spoken to directly.
4. Failure to follow through on tasks and instructions.
5. Exhibiting poor organisation
6. Avoiding/disliking tasks requiring sustained mental effort
7. Losing things necessary for tasks/activities
8. Being easily distracted (including unrelated thoughts)
9. Being forgetful in daily activities

### **Nine diagnostic symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity**

1. Fidgeting with or tapping hands or feet, squirming in seat
2. Leaving seat in situations when remaining seated is expected.
3. Experiencing feelings of restlessness
4. Having difficulty engaging in quiet, leisurely activities
5. Being “on-the-go” or acting as if “driven by a motor”.
6. Talking excessively
7. Blurting out answers
8. Having difficulty waiting for your turn
9. Interrupting or intruding on others

Not everyone with ADHD has all these symptoms: to get a diagnosis, you only have to have five out of nine for either/or inattentive/hyperactive symptoms,



and it can be any five. So, if you see symptoms and think “I don’t do that!”, you can still have ADHD. We are all a bit different; we are all individual.