

Frequently Asked Questions about Girls and Women with ADHD



1. What is ADHD?

- ADHD stands for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.
- ADHD is a brain-based disorder. Research has shown differences in certain brain regions in people with ADHD compared to people without ADHD.
- People with ADHD can experience high levels of inattention, or high levels of hyperactive and impulsive behavior; however, some individuals have difficulties with both inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity.
- Symptoms of ADHD first emerge during childhood, though may not cause difficulties until adolescence or adulthood.

2. Can girls have ADHD? I thought this was only a “boy thing.”

- Yes, girls can have ADHD including the inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive and combined (difficulties with both inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity) presentations.
- Boys are diagnosed with ADHD more frequently than girls; however, this likely does not accurately reflect the number of girls who actually have ADHD.

3. Can adult women have ADHD? I thought this was only a “kid thing.”

- Yes, women can have ADHD including the inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive and combined (difficulties with both inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity) presentations.
- ADHD symptoms can persist across the lifetime. In fact, the majority of people diagnosed during childhood continue to have ADHD or ADHD symptoms in adulthood.
- ADHD can look different over time. Generally, hyperactive symptoms tend to decline with age, while difficulties with inattention increase with age.

4. What does ADHD look like in girls? Does it look different compared to boys?

- Generally (though not always!) girls present with more inattention than hyperactive/impulsive behavior compared to boys with ADHD.
- Some inattentive girls might be called “spacey” and seem forgetful, easily distracted and often appear overwhelmed. Hyperactive and impulsive girls may be called “tomboys” due to their activity level or seem more “chatty” and intrusive with others.
- Girls with ADHD are more likely to experience internalizing disorders, such as anxiety and depression, compared to boys with the condition. In addition, some research suggests that girls with ADHD are more likely to experience greater emotion dysregulation compared to boys with ADHD.
- Symptoms of ADHD may become more apparent for girls later in childhood compared to boys or may be more obvious during times of transition, such as when starting a new grade in school or when going through puberty.
- ADHD symptoms may be perceived by parents and teachers as being less severe in girls compared to boys, especially the hyperactive and impulsive symptoms. However, girls with ADHD are at higher risk for serious challenges—including academic problems, social difficulties, and psychological disorders—especially if untreated.

5. Why are girls diagnosed with ADHD less often than boys?

- Girls with ADHD are more likely to present with inattentive symptoms, such as trouble sustaining attention, disorganization, and forgetfulness, than hyperactivity or impulsivity. Inattention is usually less obvious and less disruptive to parents and teachers, which may lead to fewer girls being referred for an evaluation.
- ADHD symptoms in girls may be misinterpreted by parents and teachers, especially if a child has developed strong coping skills or is in a highly structured setting.
- Delays in diagnosis may occur because girls are first identified as having a different psychiatric condition, such as anxiety or depression. Symptoms of anxiety and depression may be due to or made worse by underlying ADHD.
- Gender biases and expectations can also affect how adults perceive and rate behavior, leading to delays in referrals for evaluation and treatment.
- Notably, while ADHD is diagnosed more often in boys during childhood, men and women seem to be diagnosed equally as often in adulthood. This is due in part to women being able to report on their own symptoms and refer themselves for evaluation.

6. What does ADHD look like in women? Does it look different compared to men?

- Generally (though not always!) women present with more inattention than hyperactive/impulsive behavior compared to men with ADHD.
- Women with inattentive symptoms might have trouble focusing during conversations; get into frequent car accidents due to becoming distracted while driving; have difficulty keeping track of finances; have excessively messy personal spaces or a tendency to forget details and steps in daily routines.
- Women with hyperactive and impulsive symptoms may be excessively talkative; have difficulties relaxing; have trouble staying seated during meals and while watching television; impulsively spend money and receive frequent speeding tickets.
- Women with ADHD often experience lower self-esteem and poorer self-image compared to men with ADHD. Some research suggests that emotion dysregulation difficulties are more severe and occur more frequently in women with ADHD compared to men with the condition and women without ADHD.
- Women with ADHD may be misdiagnosed with other psychiatric conditions—such as an anxiety disorder, mood disorders or a personality disorder.

7. What treatments are available for girls and women with ADHD?

- There are multiple evidence-based treatments for ADHD including medication, such as psychostimulant medicines, and behavior therapy, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) for ADHD.
- Medicine and behavioral treatments are equally effective in males and females.
- There is some evidence that ADHD symptoms may be affected by hormonal fluctuations. Girls and women may want to track their ADHD symptoms over the course of their menstrual cycle and during certain periods of heightened hormonal changes (e.g., puberty, menopause) and discuss these observations with their medical provider.
- In addition to behavior therapies targeting ADHD symptoms, girls and women with ADHD may benefit from additional behavior therapies targeting co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety and depression, and developing coping skills for emotion regulation challenges.

8. I think my daughter has ADHD. What do I do first?

- Talk to your child's primary care provider about your concerns.
- You may be referred to a mental health provider, such as a child psychologist or psychiatrist, who can complete a psychological evaluation to determine whether she meets criteria for ADHD.

9. I might have ADHD. What do I do first?

- Contact your primary care physician to discuss your concerns.
- You may be referred to a mental health provider, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, who can complete a psychological evaluation to determine whether you meet criteria for ADHD.

Reference List

- Cortese, S., Faraone, S. V., Bernardi, S., Wang, S. & Blanco, C. (2016). Gender Differences in Adult Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Results From the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions (NESARC). *The Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 77(04), e421–e428. <https://doi.org/10.4088/jcp.14m09630>
- Mowlem, F., Agnew-Blais, J., Taylor, E. & Asherson, P. (2019). Do different factors influence whether girls versus boys meet ADHD diagnostic criteria? Sex differences among children with high ADHD symptoms. *Psychiatry Research*, 272, 765–773. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2018.12.128>
- Quinn PO, Madhoo M. A review of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder in women and girls: uncovering this hidden diagnosis. *Prim Care Companion CNS Disord*. 2014;16(3):PCC.13r01596. doi: 10.4088/PCC.13r01596. Epub 2014 Oct 13. PMID: 25317366; PMCID: PMC4195638.
- Young, S., Adamo, N., Ásgeirsdóttir, B. B., Branney, P., Beckett, M., Colley, W., Cubbin, S., Deeley, Q., Farrag, E., Gudjonsson, G., Hill, P., Hollingdale, J., Kilic, O., Lloyd, T., Mason, P., Paliokosta, E., Perecherla, S., Sedgwick, J., Skirrow, C., ... Woodhouse, E. (2020). Females with ADHD: An expert consensus statement taking a lifespan approach providing guidance for the identification and treatment of attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder in girls and women. *BMC Psychiatry*, 20(1), 404. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12888-020-02707-9>