

# 2021 Study Examined ADHD Symptoms in Adult Women with Recurrent Depression

Research Spotlights *highlight scientific research focused on girls and women with ADHD and inform non-scientists about the research process. This Spotlight breaks down “ADHD in adults with recurrent depression,” published in December 2021.*

## Study goals

- To examine the frequency of ADHD in middle-aged women with histories of recurrent depression
- To investigate whether certain features of depression are associated with co-occurring ADHD
- To study whether co-occurring depression and ADHD symptoms were linked to worse treatment response or more complex clinical presentations

## What is already known

- Children and adolescents with ADHD may be at higher risk for early-onset, recurrent depression.
- ADHD in childhood and adolescence has been linked to more severe depressive symptoms in adulthood.
- Depressive symptoms may mask ADHD symptoms in adulthood, potentially making it harder to identify ADHD at that stage of life.
- Individuals with depression and ADHD may have greater clinical challenges, such as not responding to antidepressant medication and higher rates of hospitalization and suicide.

## How this study was done

- 148 women (average age = 53 years) from the Early Prediction of Adolescent Depression (EPAD) study—a longitudinal study of recurrently depressed parents and their children in the United Kingdom—completed interviews and questionnaires at 4 time points between 2007 and 2020.

- During interviews, women reported on an array of different features regarding depression including the age they experienced their first major depressive episode and the number of subsequent episodes; depression symptom severity; history of suicide attempts and self-harm; number of psychiatric hospitalizations; and use and type of depression medication.
- ADHD symptoms and diagnosis were measured by self-reports on the Adult ADHD Investigator Symptom Rating Scale (AISRS) and by asking about DSM-5 criteria.

## Study findings

- 12.8% of frequently depressed women had increased ADHD symptoms; 3.4% met diagnostic criteria for ADHD. None of the participants reported being previously diagnosed with or treated for ADHD.
- A history of recurrent depression and co-occurring ADHD symptoms were associated with a more complex clinical picture. These women had earlier depression onset, more depressive episodes, more impairment and irritability, increased risk of self-harm and suicide attempts, and a higher likelihood of having been hospitalized.
- Women with depression and ADHD symptoms were more likely to have been treated with a non-first-line antidepressant medication, which suggested poor response to first-line (i.e., more commonly prescribed) medication.

## Actionable items

*If further research confirms these preliminary findings, middle-age women and their clinicians might consider the tips below.*

### Women in mid-life should:

- Explore whether ADHD is present alongside recurrent depression—especially for those whose depression started early in life.
- Be aware that individuals who are diagnosed with ADHD during childhood and adolescence are more likely to experience depression in adulthood.
- Learn about how depression may affect women differently than men. Check out this resource from the [National Institute of Mental Health](#) for more information.

### Clinicians who assess and treat psychiatric conditions in adult women should:

- Recognize that co-occurring depression and ADHD symptoms in adult women are associated with greater clinical impairment.
- Realize that recurrent adult depression may be masking “lurking disorders” such as ADHD that were not previously identified.
- Consider assessing for other conditions, including ADHD, if a patient is not responding to first-line depression treatments.
- Understand that having co-occurring ADHD and depression may require a different care plan—such as more frequent follow-up appointments or different medications—than if treating one of those conditions alone.

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## Terms to know

**Recurrent depression:** *Having more than one depressive episode that lasts over an extended period.*

**Longitudinal study:** *Consistent investigations of the same variables over time.*

**Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5):** *The American Psychiatric Association's professional reference book on mental health and brain-related disorders.*