

# A look at Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES NATIONAL INSTITUTES OF HEALTH

**NIMH**  
National Institute  
of Mental Health



Ricky sits on his hands to stop them from moving. "It's like I have a motor inside me going "brrrrr" all the time and I can't stop it."

# Does this sound like your child?

Is it hard for your child to sit still?

Does your child act without thinking first?

Does your child start but not finish things?

If you answered “yes” to these questions, you may want to read this booklet to learn more about Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder—called ADHD for short. ADHD is a real illness that starts in childhood. It can change the way children act, think, and feel.

Some children with ADHD squirm, fidget, or wiggle all the time and act without thinking. Others seem to be in another world, often staring into space or daydreaming. All of these behaviors may be signs of ADHD. This may sound like many children. But when such behaviors make it hard for a child to do well in school or make friends, ADHD may be the cause.

Parents of these children may know there is a problem, but they may not be sure what the problem is or what to do about it. **Reading this booklet will help you learn what you can do to help your child.**

## Five steps to understand and get help for ADHD:

- 1** Look for signs of ADHD.
- 2** Learn that ADHD is an illness that can be treated.
- 3** Ask your child's doctor for help.
- 4** Talk to your child's teachers.
- 5** Work together to help your child.



“When I read the checklist, I couldn’t believe it. I was nodding and saying “sí, sí” for each thing. I made many check marks. They all described my son, Juan. It made me want to figure out this whole thing so he could finally get better.”

# Step 1

## Look for signs of ADHD.

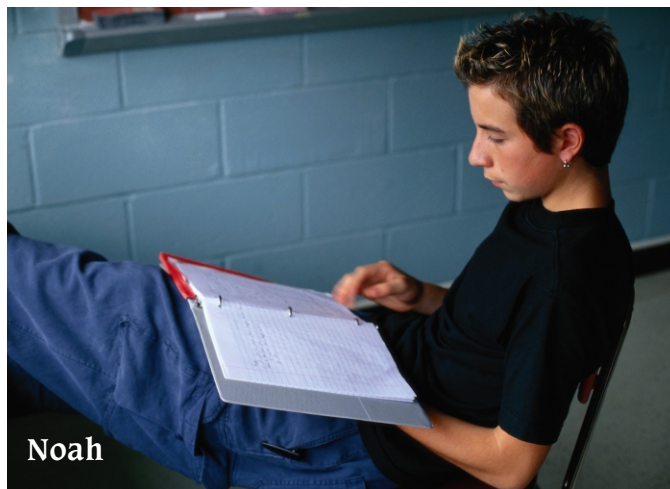
Put a check mark next to each one that sounds like your child.

### My child often...

- is moving something—fingers, hands, arms, feet, or legs.
- walks, runs, or climbs around when others are seated.
- has trouble waiting in line or taking turns.
- doesn't finish things.
- gets bored after just a short while.
- daydreams or seems to be in another world.
- talks when other people are talking.
- gets frustrated with schoolwork or homework.
- acts quickly without thinking first.
- is sidetracked by what is going on around him or her.



Does this sound like your child? If so, talk with your child's doctor. The doctor can tell you whether your child has ADHD. The doctor can also tell you which treatments can help your child. If you visit the doctor, take this checklist with you.



"I do OK in gym class. Library time is the worst. All I hear is "ssshhh." I tell myself "Don't talk," but I never stop myself in time."



## What is normal?

Most children have trouble sitting still. Many kids don't finish their schoolwork. Few children sit through meals without tapping, kicking, or drumming. So how do you know what is normal and what is ADHD? Only a doctor can tell you for sure. ADHD behavior doesn't happen in only one place, like at school. It may happen every day in the classroom, on the playground, and at home. ADHD can lead to problems with learning, friendships, and family life.



Pearl

“I get in trouble all the time,” Pearl tells her school counselor. “My teacher doesn’t like me. At recess none of the other kids want to play with me. Am I bad?”

# Step 2

## **Learn that ADHD is an illness that can be treated.**

ADHD can make children feel bad about themselves. They may see themselves as failures, when they are not. They need help with this common childhood illness.

With the right care, children with ADHD are able to pay attention, control their behavior, and slow their fast pace. With the illness under control, children can grow, learn, and develop better than before.



“Tyronne’s teacher gave me a booklet on ADHD to read. It really helped. I used to think I was not a good parent or that he was not a good kid. Now I know it has been ADHD all along. It’s an illness—like Ginetta’s asthma. No one is to blame. It’s a card we’ve been dealt. That’s all. Now that we know what we are dealing with and how to treat it, it’s getting better.”

## What causes ADHD?

The exact cause of ADHD has not yet been found. ADHD seems to run in families. If a parent, uncle, or grandparent has ADHD, other family members may also develop it. Physical differences in parts of the brain may also have something to do with it. There may not be a single cause, but a few things may come together to cause ADHD.



Puran

"I called the community mental health center because you don't need insurance to go there. We met with a child psychiatrist. The doctor asked us questions about how my daughter Shahi acts at home and school. The doctor also wanted to know about any bad things that had happened in her life, like when her father died. Then we got some forms for Shahi's teachers to fill out. This was how we found out she had ADHD."

# Step 3

## Ask your child's doctor for help.

If you are worried about your child's behavior, trust your feelings. Ask your child's doctor for help. Many parents start by taking their child to see a family doctor or pediatrician. Some families go on to see doctors who specialize in childhood problems such as ADHD. These doctors are called "**child psychiatrists**" or "**child psychologists.**" Tell the doctor about the behavior that worries you. The doctor will tell you if the cause may be ADHD.



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The doctor will also want to look for other possible causes of the behavior. Sometimes children who are dealing with divorce, death, or other problems act in ways that look like, but aren't, ADHD. For this reason, your doctor will ask about things that are happening at home. The doctor will also make sure there are no other diseases or disabilities that might be causing your child's behavior.

**Medicine** and **“behavior therapy”** are the most common treatments for ADHD. Medicine for ADHD can help children pay attention, finish tasks, and think before they act. Behavior therapy involves meeting with the doctor to work on new skills to make it easier to deal with relationships, rules, limits, and choices. Both medicine and behavior therapy are safe and proven to work. These treatments used together give the best results.



“ I am eleven years old and I just did my first puzzle. Before, when I wasn't taking medicine, I'd start but never finish them. I'd end up throwing the pieces on the floor. This time I took a short break, but I stuck with it. And I did it! My mom is really proud of me. I'm proud of me too.”

# Step 4

## Talk to your child's teachers.

Your child's school may be able to help in many ways. Talk to your child's teachers about ADHD.

- Ask if your child is having any problems in the classroom or on the playground.
- Tell the teachers that your child has ADHD, a common childhood illness.
- List any medications your child takes and explain any other treatments.
- Find out if your child can get any special services that help with learning.

To make sure your child gets all the help he or she needs, you can also talk to a guidance counselor at the school.

# Step 5

## Work together to help your child.

Parents, children, teachers, and doctors should work together as members of a team. Together you can set goals for your child and find the right treatment to reach those goals. Some of the goals families can work toward include:

- helping children feel better about themselves,
- helping children do better in school,
- helping children follow classroom and household rules,
- helping children make more friends, and
- reducing the behaviors that cause problems.

Some children with ADHD also get tutoring or counseling at school. Let your doctor know about any services provided by the school.



“In therapy I work on ways to remember things better. One is called **BHB**. It stands for **B**ackpack, **H**omework, **B**ooks. And I say to myself, “Have you got your BHB on?” My mom says it to me too. It helps me remember my school stuff.”

## ADHD in teens and adults:

Many people think of ADHD as a childhood illness, but it can continue through the teen years and into adulthood.

The teen years can be especially hard. With ADHD, people act without thinking first. This can make it hard for teens to make careful choices about drugs, drinking, smoking, or sex. In therapy, teens and parents work on rules, limits, and choices to help things go smoother at home and school.

ADHD also makes it hard to finish what you start. This can be a real problem for adults. Men and women may have trouble keeping up with the things they need to do at home and at work. Adults with ADHD may lose job after job because of their illness.

**At any age, treatment can help.**



## Tips for parents:

Try to learn as much as you can about ADHD. As a parent, trust your thoughts and feelings. You know your child better than anyone else. If you don't think your child is getting the services he or she needs, speak up. Tell your child's doctor or school what you think. And don't stop asking questions.

Remember ADHD can be treated. Keep working to help your child get better. To be your child's best helper, take good care of yourself and stay healthy.

## For more information:

You can call or write any of these organizations for free information about ADHD. You can also find more information on their web sites. “Free call” phone numbers can be used by anyone, anywhere in the United States.

### **National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH)**

Office of Communications

6001 Executive Boulevard

Room 8184, MSC 9663

Bethesda, MD 20892-9663

**Free call: 1-800-615-6464**

Local call: 301-443-4513

Hearing impaired (TTY): 301-443-8431

Web site: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

E-mail: [nimhinfo@nih.gov](mailto:nimhinfo@nih.gov)

**Children and Adults with Attention-  
Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder  
(CHADD)**

8181 Professional Place, Suite 150  
Landover, MD 20785

**Free call: 1-800-233-4050**

Web site: <http://www.chadd.org>

**Federation of Families for  
Children's Mental Health**

1101 King Street  
Alexandria, VA 22314

Local call: 703-684-7710

Web site: <http://www.ffcmh.org>

**National Information Center for  
Children and Youth with Disabilities  
(NICHCY)**

P.O. Box 1492

Washington, DC 20013

**Free call: 1-800-695-0285**

Web site: <http://www.nichcy.org>

*All contact information was current as of the printed date of this booklet. Check the web sites for any changes in this information.*

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**The names and photos used in this  
booklet are not real. The stories, however,  
are based on known experiences of ADHD.**

# Things to remember:

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