

ADHD in girls and women

Commonly affects about 8% of children. 50% co-occurrence rate with other conditions.

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) has long been thought of as a condition affecting males. But more women and girls are being diagnosed as our understanding of it deepens. This is due, in part, to learning that ADHD in girls can look different than it does in boys. Originally the assessments were designed based on male characteristics (by men)

For instance, girls are more likely to have inattentive ADHD, in which daydreaming and shyness are common. Conversely, it is more typical for boys to have hyperactive-impulsive ADHD or combined type ADHD.¹

If left undiagnosed, ADHD in girls can result in disadvantages such as a lack of accommodation in the classroom, low self-esteem, and self-blame. It can even affect mental health well into adulthood. Being aware of the different symptoms of ADHD in girls can help you know when it might be time to see a doctor for an evaluation.

Current thinking is it is more likely for a woman with ADHD to commit suicide than a man with adhd.

Symptoms of ADHD in Girls

ADHD symptoms in girls are often thought of as personality /traits/characteristics rather than ADHD, which is why they are often overlooked or explained away. But what exactly does ADHD look like in girls vs. boys? The following signs may help tell that a girl has ADHD include:

- Appears withdrawn
- Cries easily
- Daydreaming and in a world of her own
- Difficulty maintaining focus; easily distracted
- Disorganized and messy (in both appearance and physical space)
- Doesn't appear to be trying
- Doesn't seem motivated
- Forgetful
- Highly sensitive to noise, fabrics, and emotions
- Hyper-talkative (always has lots to say, but is not good at listening)
- Hyperreactivity (exaggerated emotional responses)
- Looks to be making "careless" mistakes
- Might often slam her doors shut
- Often late (poor time management)
- Problems completing tasks
- Seems quiet, like they are not engaging
- Seems to get easily upset
- Shifting focus from one activity to another
- Takes time to process information and directions; seems like she doesn't hear you
- Verbally impulsive; blurts out and interrupts others

ADHD characteristics can manifest differently in each child. You may have one child who has been diagnosed with ADHD, but never considered that the other might also have it because their issues seem so different.

ADHD characteristics may change somewhat as a girl ages. ADHD in teenage girls can have a significant impact on emotional and social well-being. Teen girls may struggle with social rejection, difficulty staying focused in school, poor impulse control, shyness, anxiety, and poor self-esteem.³

Girls may internalize their symptoms, mistakenly believing that their struggles are due to character flaws or personality traits rather than as signs of neurodivergence.

They can mask themselves.

For many girls with ADHD, paying attention to the task at hand is their biggest challenge. They can get distracted by external events or drift off into a world of their own. For example, a bird outside a classroom window may take attention away from something more important in their environment, like a teacher announcing the date of an upcoming exam.

To compensate, a girl with ADHD may hyperfocus on something she likes or is good at. She will put forth so much effort and concentration toward that one thing that parents or teachers may dismiss the possibility of ADHD.

Sometimes, this hyperfocus is a coping strategy to keep herself entertained when something is boring. Other times, she may not feel she has any control over it. While it can be advantageous at times, it can also be disruptive when it interferes with a girl's ability to focus on other things.

Always in Motion

Some girls with ADHD display more of the classic signs of hyperactivity. If a girl is hyperactive, she might be described as a "tomboy" because she likes physical activity and doesn't seem to enjoy the same things as other girls her age.

ADHD in girls might also show up in less obvious ways that still involve always being in motion. Examples include doodling constantly or always moving around in her chair.

Other behaviours that are related to hyperactivity, such as aggression, talkativeness, and emotionality, are sometimes misattributed to personality characteristics rather than ADHD.⁴

Lack of Impulse Control

A girl with ADHD may have impulsivity and be hyper-talkative. She may be verbally impulsive, interrupt others, talk excessively, or change topics repeatedly during conversations. She might even blurt out words without thinking about their impact on others.

Girls with ADHD can also be overly sensitive. Some are described as overemotional and easily excitable.

Simply knowing she has ADHD can relieve a young girl of a huge burden of guilt and shame. It can also free her from the damaging labels of being "spacey," "unmotivated," "stupid," or "lazy."

A girl with ADHD is none of those things. She simply has ADHD. And strategies can be put in place to make her life a little easier and her future brighter. The first step to making this happen is recognizing the different ADHD symptoms in girls, and now you know what to look for.

In addition to behavioural therapies, medications for ADHD can be very helpful in reducing impulsiveness and hyperactivity and increasing focus and attention. Let's gain an understanding of the types of prescription medications people with ADHD can use to feel better and improve their symptoms.

Stimulants

Stimulant medications are the most commonly prescribed medications for ADHD and have been found to be very effective in alleviating ADHD symptoms. Stimulants increase the level of the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain. This improves inattention, impulsivity, and hyperactivity in people with ADHD.¹

While stimulants are the classic medication of choice for ADHD and are approved by Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for treatment in children, many people either cannot tolerate stimulant therapy or don't respond to it. Also, some people respond to one kind of stimulant and not another.²

Some common side effects of stimulants include:

- Decreased appetite
- Insomnia
- Dizziness
- Increased anxiety
- Irritability

Less common side effects that may occur include:

- Mild stomachaches
- Nausea
- Blurry vision
- Increase in blood pressure and heart rate
- Tics

Some stimulant medications for ADHD include:⁴

- Adderall (amphetamine, dextroamphetamine)
- Concerta or Daytrana (methylphenidate)
- Desoxyn (methamphetamine)
- Dexedrine or Zenzedi (dextroamphetamine)
- Dyanavel XR (amphetamine)⁵
- Focalin (dexmethylphenidate)
- Metadate CD, Methylin, Ritalin (methylphenidate)
- Vyvanse (lisdexamfetamine)