

Understanding ADHD

A Guide for Patients

What is ADHD?

ADHD (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder) is a common brain-based condition that affects attention, impulse control, and activity level. It is **not** caused by laziness, low intelligence, or poor character. It comes from differences in how certain brain chemicals — dopamine and norepinephrine — work in areas of the brain responsible for focus, planning, and self-control.

Common Signs

You don't need to have all of these, and they can show up differently in different people:

- Difficulty focusing on tasks that aren't immediately interesting
- Losing track of time, deadlines, or belongings
- Trouble finishing tasks you've started
- Feeling restless, or having a hard time sitting still
- Acting or speaking before thinking things through
- Zoning out during conversations or meetings
- Feeling mentally overwhelmed by multi-step tasks

Why Does This Happen?

Think of it like being nearsighted. Your eyes aren't "failing" — they just focus light differently, and glasses correct for that. In ADHD, certain brain circuits process attention and impulse control differently, and treatment helps bridge that gap. It is a real, well-studied medical condition — not a personal failing.

Treatment Options

1. Medication - Stimulants (e.g., methylphenidate, amphetamine-based medications) are usually the most effective first-line option. They help increase dopamine and norepinephrine activity in the brain.
- **Non-stimulants** (e.g., atomoxetine, guanfacine) are alternatives if stimulants aren't a good fit — for example, if you have a history of substance use, certain heart conditions, or significant anxiety/tics.

2. Behavioral Strategies - Using alarms, calendars, and reminders instead of relying on memory - Breaking large tasks into smaller steps - Creating consistent routines and structure - "Body doubling" (working alongside someone else to stay on task)

3. Therapy / Coaching - ADHD-focused coaching or cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can help build practical systems and address any self-esteem effects from years of undiagnosed struggle.

What to Expect

- Medication effects are often noticeable within days to a few weeks, though finding the right dose sometimes takes some adjustment.
- Follow-up appointments will monitor effectiveness and any side effects (common ones include reduced appetite or trouble sleeping — these are usually manageable).
- Treatment is not about becoming a different person — it's about helping you access the focus and follow-through you already have.

A Few Reassurances

- ADHD does not limit what you can achieve. Many people with ADHD are highly successful, creative, and capable — the condition affects *how* you get there, not your ceiling.
- If you're feeling frustration or shame about years of struggling before diagnosis, that's a very common reaction — and it says nothing about your worth or ability.
- ADHD is manageable, and most people see real improvement with the right combination of treatment and strategies.

Questions to Bring to Your Next Appointment

- What type of ADHD do I have (inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, or combined)?
- What medication options make sense for my situation?
- What side effects should I watch for, and when should I call?
- Are there accommodations I should ask for at work or school?
- How will we track whether treatment is working?

This handout is for general education and does not replace personalized medical advice from your treating clinician.