

Is it ADHD or something else?



Are you preparing to have your child evaluated for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)? If so, you may be aware that there is currently no medical test available to diagnose the condition. Much of your child's assessment will be based on information you, your spouse, caregivers, and teachers provide. You will be asked specific questions about your child's health, behavior, and school performance. Your answers will greatly assist the doctor in making a correct diagnosis.

To prepare for the evaluation, take a holistic (whole) view of your child. ADHD can cause behavior that appears inattentive, impulsive, or hyperactive — or any combination of these. But there are many other conditions and situations that can cause behavior that “looks like” ADHD. When you give the doctor a holistic view of your child, he may then pinpoint problems other than ADHD. Below are some factors to think about before you see the doctor.

General health

- Does your child eat healthy foods that support his growing body? Does he eat a good breakfast before heading to school? Children usually pay attention better if they are well fed and their energy levels don't change too much during the day.
- Could she have health problems that affect her attention or behavior? For example, uncorrected hearing and vision problems might keep her from responding to you or her teacher. She might appear inattentive.
- If your child takes medication, make sure you're aware of all possible side effects. Certain medications can cause a person to feel drowsy, dizzy, or nervous. His

behavior can then appear inattentive, impulsive, or hyperactive. This applies to prescription and over-the-counter medications.

Sleeping habits

An overly tired child may have trouble staying awake and focused. Ask yourself these questions:

- Does your child sleep soundly?
- How many hours does she usually sleep each night? 8 to 11 hours of sleep is considered healthy for most kids.
- Does he suffer from insomnia?
- Does she wake up often because of nightmares or bedwetting?
- Is there a lot of noise (music, television) inside your home at night?
- Is he kept awake by outside noise, such as traffic or barking dogs?

Home environment

- Does your family follow a regular routine at home? Do meals, homework sessions, and bedtime occur at about the same times each day? Many children feel secure and focused when they know what to expect.
- Does your child have a quiet, organized space at home for reading and doing homework? Clutter and noise can make it hard to concentrate.

Your culture

Does your child come from a culture different from that of her teacher and classmates? If so, and if her teacher has expressed concern about her behavior, you may want to help the teacher understand the attitudes and accepted behaviors of your culture.

Mood and emotions

Does your child seem to worry more than other kids his age? Does he have “nervous habits,” like biting his nails? Or, have you noticed he seems to be unusually sad, angry, or withdrawn? If there is extreme stress in your household, it may affect your child’s emotions. Stress can come in the form of divorce, remarriage, a new baby, fighting, or a death in the family. Does your child often complain about his school, teacher, or classmates? Or, does he refuse to talk to you about school? Either way, he may be feeling stressed about people and situations at school.

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School performance

Has your child's teacher reported behavior, performance, or attention problems in the classroom? If so, ask to meet with her to:

- See how the classroom is set up. If your child has vision or hearing problems, is she sitting too far from the board and teacher, or near a noisy heater? How well does the classroom furniture "fit" her? Can it be adjusted?
- Ask how well your child performs compared to other kids his age. If the teacher is concerned that he's falling behind, you might discuss the possibility of a learning disability (LD). Learning disabilities can exist with or without ADHD. The teacher normally works with the parents and doctor to evaluate a child for ADHD.

Be an expert about your child

As you consider the factors described above, you may discover some specific problems. For each problem, what action could you take? Here are some options:

- Change the environment or routine.
- Work with the teacher and other school professionals who can help your child.
- Talk with your child's doctor and other professionals.

Any information you share will help the doctor determine whether ADHD or perhaps another condition is at the root of the problem. As you seek help for your child, remember your input is valuable to all the professionals you encounter.

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