

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

ADHD can affect a child's performance at school



Alamy

WHAT IS IT?

- Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) usually presents in children in the preschool and early school years.
- Children with ADHD find it difficult to control their behaviour, have problems paying attention and are easily distracted. They may also be overactive and restless.
- It has an incidence of 5%, although not all these cases require treatment (NICE, 2006).
- ADHD can affect performance at school as well as impair the development of social skills.
- There are three main types:
 - Predominantly hyperactive and impulsive;
 - Predominantly inattentive (commonly known as attention deficit disorder);
 - A combination of the two. Most cases come under this category.

CAUSES

- Precise causes are not known. There is thought to be a genetic component as it runs in families and is more common in males.

- Research suggests that the frontal lobes may be altered, affecting impulse control and concentration. There may also be a lack of dopamine in this part of the brain.
- Environmental factors such as watching too much television or poor parenting are not thought to be a trigger. Parental stress is thought to be a result of having a child with ADHD rather than being the cause of the ADHD.

SYMPTOMS

- Symptoms vary depending on ADHD type. They can include:
 - Continuous restlessness;
 - Irritability;
 - Aggression;
 - Emotional immaturity;
 - Disregard for danger;
 - Lack of discipline;
 - Clumsiness;
 - Speech development problems.
- Antisocial behaviour becomes more common as the child becomes older.
- Beginning school can often expose ADHD. Learning can be hampered by attention and concentration deficits, although it is not linked to intelligence.

- Social skills can start to be a problem when the child begins to mix with other children and is exposed to authority figures.
- If ADHD is untreated, symptoms will persist into adolescence and even adulthood. This can result in social problems such as difficulties in sustaining employment and forming relationships.

DIAGNOSIS

- There is no definitive diagnosis. A specific list of criteria must be met:
 - Symptoms need to occur in more than one environment, for example, at home and at school;
 - The child must have six or more symptoms of inattention or six or more symptoms of hyperactivity/impulsivity;
 - Symptoms must have begun before the child was seven;
 - Symptoms must have persisted for at least six months.

TREATMENT

- Medication is combined with behavioural therapies.
- NICE has issued new guidance on the use of medicines in ADHD recommending methylphenidate, atomoxetine and dexamfetamine for the treatment of children and adolescents (NICE, 2006).
- Behavioural therapies include:
 - Cognitive behavioural therapy;
 - Counselling;
 - Social skills training;
 - Parenting skills training.
- Research into the role of diet is ongoing.

REFERENCES

- NICE (2006) *NICE Issues Guidance on Drug Treatments for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*. London: NICE.
- Thapar, A. (2006) Predictors of antisocial behaviour in children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*; 15: 2, 118-125.