

# Understanding the Complexities of ADHD Diagnosis

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## What is ADHD?

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a condition that affects how a child pays attention, manages impulses, and regulates emotions. ADHD can appear in three main forms:

- **Predominantly inattentive** – difficulties with focus, organisation, and following instructions.
- **Predominantly hyperactive-impulsive** – fidgeting, restlessness, and acting without thinking.
- **Combined presentation** – features of both inattention and hyperactivity/impulsivity.

Each child's presentation is unique, and symptoms can vary widely in severity and impact.

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## The Diagnostic Process

Diagnosing ADHD involves a **comprehensive assessment** that may include:

- ☒ A detailed history and physical examination.
- ☒ Input from parents, teachers, and other caregivers.
- ☒ Standardised questionnaires and rating scales.
- ☒ In some cases, blood tests (such as iron studies or nutritional screens) to rule out other causes of poor attention or behavioural changes.

This detailed approach ensures accuracy and helps clinicians create the best treatment plan for your child.

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## Why ADHD Can Be Difficult to Diagnose





ADHD symptoms often **overlap** with other conditions, which makes diagnosis more complex. Examples include:

- **Anxiety and depression** – both can cause inattention, irritability, or restlessness.
- **Learning difficulties or intellectual disability** – may mimic attentional problems.
- **Medical conditions** – such as iron deficiency, coeliac disease, or thyroid disorders, can affect attention and behaviour.
- **Temperament and environmental stress** – family changes, school stress, or social challenges may also contribute.

Girls are sometimes **overlooked**, as they may show fewer signs of hyperactivity and instead present with inattention, emotional ups and downs, or “quiet daydreaming.” This can lead to delays in diagnosis and missed opportunities for support.

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## Shared Symptoms with Other Conditions

-  **Inattention** may stem from ADHD, anxiety, or both.
-  **Hyperactivity** can look like ADHD, but also like restlessness in anxious children.
-  **Irritability or emotional swings** may reflect ADHD or depression.
-  **Developmental stage** – young children may naturally show high activity levels, making it harder to distinguish ADHD from normal behaviour.

**The environment matters** – symptoms may appear worse during times of stress at home or at school, so context is always important.

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## Co-Existing Conditions

Many children with ADHD also experience other challenges such as:

- Anxiety or depression
- Learning difficulties
- Low self-esteem


Because these conditions often overlap, diagnosis takes time and requires a holistic approach.

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## Collaboration in Diagnosis

ADHD diagnosis is a **team effort**. It usually involves:





- Paediatricians (often coordinating the process)
- Parents, carers, and teachers (providing observations)
- Allied health professionals (psychologists, occupational therapists, speech pathologists)

 Parents can help by ensuring teacher forms are completed and returned promptly. In some schools, these forms must go through the principal first, which may slow things down. Parental advocacy often speeds up the process.

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## Supports While Waiting for a Diagnosis

Families don't need to wait for a formal diagnosis to access help. Useful supports include:

-  **Psychology or occupational therapy** – for early behavioural strategies.
-  **Educational support** – to address school difficulties.
-  **Parenting programs** – to build skills and confidence in managing behaviours.
-  **Psychologists** – can sometimes begin the diagnostic process and complete forms before the paediatrician appointment.

Allied health support is valuable **even before a diagnosis is confirmed**.

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## Treatment and Ongoing Care

Medication is only **one part of ADHD treatment**. The best outcomes come from combining:

- Allied health support (psychology, OT, ADHD coaching)
- Parent education and behaviour management strategies
- In some cases, medication to support therapy and improve attention/impulse control

Depending on the health system, ADHD care may be led by a paediatrician, GP, or a shared-care model involving both. Some systems also involve clinical nurse consultants to coordinate reports and information.

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## Final Thoughts

ADHD diagnosis is a journey. It requires time, collaboration, and a full understanding of your child's environment and needs. While the process may feel lengthy, a **thorough and accurate diagnosis** leads to tailored treatment and better outcomes.

Parents play a key role as advocates, ensuring forms are completed, liaising with schools, and accessing early supports. With the right team and strategies, children with ADHD can thrive.

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## Disclaimer

This handout provides general information only. It does not replace medical advice. Your doctor is best placed to guide you on the diagnosis and management of ADHD for your child.