

ADHD

(Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

What is ADHD?

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. As the name suggests, it causes difficulties in maintaining attention. It can also cause impulsive and hyperactive behaviour. Some people prefer to use the term 'attention difference', but for ease, we use ADHD throughout this factsheet.

It is possible to access diagnosis and treatment for ADHD through the NHS, which has accepted it as a condition since 2009. However, referrals for assessment must be made through a GP.

Along with autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia, ADHD is a neurodiverse condition and is considered a specific learning difference. Neurodiverse conditions can overlap or co-occur, meaning individuals may have another of these conditions alongside their ADHD.



How common is ADHD?

Figures vary slightly as to how common ADHD is, but it is generally estimated to affect between 5% and 8% of the population. It is more commonly diagnosed in boys, with between two and five times more boys being diagnosed than girls. This could be due to the fact that boys present more often with disruptive behaviour that is more likely to prompt a referral for assessment.

In the UK, the prevalence of ADHD in adults specifically is estimated to be between 3% and 4%, with a male-to-female ratio of approximately three to one. The drop-off in rates from childhood to adulthood does not necessarily mean that people no longer have ADHD. Indeed, up to 60% of people who have childhood ADHD will continue to show symptoms into their adult life. It is therefore more likely that the difference in the figures reflects the fact that many older adults may not have been able to access an assessment to gain a diagnosis when they were younger. As a result, they may have developed coping strategies growing up which mask some of the issues, reducing the impetus to seek a diagnosis in later life.

There are **three different subtypes of ADHD**:

- **Inattentive subtype**, formerly known as attention deficit disorder (ADD), which affects between 20%-30% of people with ADHD
- **Hyperactive subtype**, which is thought to affect around 15% of people
- **Combined subtype**, which accounts for the rest of diagnoses.

We will look more at the different subtypes and the particular difficulties they pose later in the factsheet.

What skills and strengths do people with ADHD have?

With the right support, people with ADHD can bring a number of key strengths and skills to a team or project:

Hyperfocus

They often display real drive and intense concentration. Once they are engaged in a task, particularly if it is one that aligns with their interests and skills, they will be able to focus intently on it for a long period of time or until it is completed, without being distracted.

Spontaneity, drive and passion

In the workplace, the impulsivity that is characteristic of people with ADHD can translate into a willingness to try new things, get quickly stuck into tasks (particularly beneficial in fast-moving industries) and take chances or risks that could take your business to the next level.

High energy and enthusiasm

The passion and can-do attitude they often bring can be contagious, helping to lift the mood and motivate others in the team.

Creativity and an ability to think outside the box

People with ADHD tend to experience non-sequential and spontaneous thought processes (also known as cognitive dynamism). This alternative way of thinking means that they often notice details and patterns that others won't see and take a different approach to problems, looking at them from all sides and focusing on the whole picture. As a result, they bring a different perspective and will often persevere in seeking a solution where others can't find one, suggesting innovative ways of doing things that can help to challenge the norm and inspire positive change.

Resilience and empathy

Because of the struggles they will likely have experienced due to their condition, many people with ADHD show a greater level of determination and persistence, which can be highly useful when faced with change, workplace challenges and stressful or pressurised situations. They also tend to be highly empathetic and compassionate to others.

Other characteristics

People with ADHD often have a good sense of fun and well-developed communication and conversation skills, both of which can be of real benefit in the workplace.



What challenges and difficulties can people with ADHD encounter?

ADHD can impact people in a number of areas, and the different subtypes can cause different challenges:

Inattentive type ADHD

People with inattentive ADHD often lose focus, tend to be forgetful and seem to have trouble listening. The condition can be mistaken for apathy and daydreaminess in children, while adults may be incorrectly diagnosed and treated for mood disorders or anxiety.

Signs or symptoms which could prompt a diagnosis include:

- Difficulty sustaining attention and being easily distracted
- Overlooking details
- Making careless mistakes and errors
- Appearing not to listen when spoken to
- Not following through on instructions
- Struggling with interruptions
- Flitting from task to task
- Difficulty with multitasking
- Finding it hard to start and finish projects
- Difficulty planning, organising and prioritising
- Avoiding tasks that require sustained mental effort
- Having a disorganised workspace
- Losing things necessary for tasks or activities
- Being forgetful, for example, missing deadlines or appointments.



Hyperactive impulsive type ADHD

Despite this subtype of ADHD being the least common, the effects it produces – an inability to sit still and a tendency to interrupt and say things without thinking – is the stereotypical image most of us have of the condition.

People with this type may display signs or symptoms including:

- Fidgety hands or feet or squirming in their seat
- Standing up or moving around when it's inappropriate to do so
- Feeling restless and agitated
- Racing thoughts
- Difficulty engaging in activities quietly and calmly
- Being constantly 'on the go'
- Talking quickly and often excessively
- Blurting out answers before the full question has been asked
- Interrupting or intruding on others' conversations
- Difficulty waiting their turn
- Becoming easily bored
- Craving excitement
- Taking risks or acting recklessly.

Combined type ADHD

Combined type ADHD is diagnosed when someone displays six or more symptoms of inattention and six or more symptoms of hyperactivity and impulsivity, as listed above. This is the most common type of ADHD, occurring in over half of all cases.

Other potential challenges of ADHD

Alongside difficulties with concentration and focus, organisation and memory and hyperactivity and impulsivity, some people with ADHD will also experience emotional and social challenges.

For example, they may have periods where they find it difficult to manage their emotions and become short-tempered, irritable and prone to mood swings. While the difficulties many people go through due to their ADHD can help to build character strengths, this experience can also result in feelings of under-achievement, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, which can lead people to feel insecure and sensitive to feedback. Sometimes, the effects of ADHD can put a strain on personal and working relationships, too.

ADHD affects people differently, and the impact in the workplace will vary depending on the person's role and the type of work they do. It is important not to assume that everyone with ADHD will experience all of the potential difficulties we have covered here, or to the same extent. The individual is the expert in their condition, so they should be your number one source of information about how it affects them and the type of support they find most helpful.

Helpful tips for supporting someone with ADHD at work

Whether you have an employee, colleague or customer with ADHD, there are some simple things you can do to make their life easier and support them with some of the key areas they may struggle with.

Concentration and focus

- Avoid open-plan offices or provide access to quiet space
- Reduce distractions (for example, by allowing them to turn off email and message notifications or set their work status to 'Do not disturb')
- Allow them to focus on one task at a time
- Encourage regular breaks
- Allow them to alternate between routine and more creative tasks.

Time management

- Encourage the use of diaries, planners, checklists and alarms
- Support with forward planning and prioritising tasks
- Agree a schedule of work (with timings) before they start on a task or project
- Provide them with interim deadlines to help them break tasks down and ensure steady progress towards completion.

Organisation

- Help them set up an organised workspace, for example, by providing folders, trays and desk tidies
- Use colour coding and labelling
- Suggest allocating planning and organisation time at the start and end of each day
- Encourage them to write down tasks and information in a to-do list that they can refer back to.

Impulsivity and hyperactivity

- Allow them to take regular breaks to stand up and walk around
- Arrange walking meetings
- Suggest that they do something physical during meetings, for example, note-taking, doodling or using a stress ball
- Plan shorter sessions working on set tasks or add in extra breaks
- Encourage them to engage in regular physical activity, particularly out in the fresh air, as this can be beneficial in helping to channel high energy.

Communication and social difficulties

- Use clear and concise communication
- Make sure you recap information and check their understanding
- Make standards of behaviour clear
- Allocate a work buddy.

Emotional difficulties and lack of confidence

- Provide them with an outlet for worries and stress, for example by allocating a work buddy or scheduling regular 1:1 catch-ups
- Focus on their strengths when allocating work
- Set small, achievable goals and celebrate their success when they accomplish them
- Regularly provide positive feedback and praise.

Remember, the individual is the expert in their condition – if in doubt, check with them!