Understanding the Difference Between ADD and ADHD

by KRISTI LAZZARI

ADHD vs. ADD: What You Need to Know

It can be confusing to navigate your way around a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). With all the information out there – as well as misinformation – it can get overwhelming at times.

Many people ask about the difference between ADHD and something we used to hear a lot about, attention deficit disorder, or ADD. Are they the same thing? How are they different? Are they treated differently or the same? Continue reading on to find the answers to the question, ADD vs. ADHD: is there a difference?

What Is ADHD?

ADHD describes a condition of the brain that leads to a combination of inability to focus attention, hyperactivity, and poor impulse control. It affects the area of the brain that allows one to plan ahead, solve problems, or understand one's actions.

These symptoms are severe enough to interfere with normal development and the ability to function in daily life.

There are three sub-types of ADHD.

- **Predominantly hyperactive/impulsive ADHD** involves restlessness and lack of impulse control, but not symptoms of inattention.
- **Predominantly Inattentive ADHD** features lack of focus, forgetfulness, and disorganization. Symptoms of hyperactivity are not present.
- **Combined ADHD** is characterized by hyperactivity and impulsivity as well as inattention.

What Is ADD?

ADD was used to describe Attention Deficit Disorder that occurred without the added symptom of hyperactivity/impulsivity.

The current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders only recognizes ADHD and its sub-types, so what was once ADD is now referred to as ADHD Inattentive Type.

Common Symptoms of ADHD in Adults

Symptoms of predominantly hyperactive/impulsive ADHD can include:

- Always being on the go
- Squirming while seated, fidgeting with objects, or tapping hands or feet
- Regularly leaving seat when it is not appropriate to do so, such as in meetings or during lectures

- Excessive talking
- Trouble waiting turn, excessive impatience
- Interrupting others or intruding on activities
- Blurting out answers before someone finishes the question

Common Symptoms of ADD in Adults

The symptoms of predominantly inattentive ADHD can include:

- Trouble organizing tasks or activities
- Easily distracted
- Forgetfulness
- Losing things
- Avoidance, dislike, and procrastination of things that are not considered interesting
- Loss of focus on chores or work-related duties
- Not following clear directions
- Seeming to not listen when spoken to
- Regularly making careless mistakes
- Trouble holding attention on social activities or other tasks

How Is ADHD Diagnosed in Adults?

An adult must exhibit at least five symptoms of ADHD. Symptoms must have been present for at least six months, and three or more must have been present before the age of 12.

Symptoms also have to be at a severe level. Everyone will experience the symptoms of ADHD sometimes; we all lose things or can be forgetful. The difference is that someone with ADHD experiences symptoms to the degree that their daily life is compromised.

Symptoms must be present in multiple environments, such as work and home. Before a diagnosis can be made doctors must do a complete evaluation and make sure symptoms cannot be explained in other ways or by other disorders.

If a diagnosis of ADHD is made, whether it is primarily hyperactive, primarily inattentive, or combined type, the first step is education. A patient must educate themselves on their diagnosis and develop a treatment plan.

Treating ADHD

The course of treatment most doctors will advise is therapy in combination with medication, and lifestyle changes such as diet, exercise, and getting enough sleep.

Some patients may not be able to take medication or may choose not to, and opt instead to work with a therapist and possibly an ADHD coach to help them manage their symptoms, build strengths, and work on weaknesses.

It is important to get some kind of treatment, whatever you are most comfortable with.

What Medication Options are Available?

Medications can be beneficial for about 80 percent of those with ADHD. Medication will not cure ADHD, and it will not work alone without also learning coping strategies, but many find it beneficial.

ADHD is treated with both stimulant and non-stimulant medications. It is important to understand the medicines your doctor prescribes for you, take them exactly as directed, and weigh the pros and cons of each before you and your doctor decide on a treatment plan.

Stimulant Medication

Stimulant medication is usually the first prescribed to treat ADHD. Stimulants come in both short and long-acting forms. They include methylphenidate and amphetamine compounds.

Stimulant medications seem to work by increasing dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is associated with motivation, pleasure, attention, and movement. Stimulants can boost concentration and focus while reducing hyperactive and impulsive behaviors.

Some commonly prescribed stimulant medications are (this is not a complete list):

Amphetamines:

- Adderall
- Dexadrine
- Vyvanse
- ProCentra

Methamphetamines:

- Metadate
- Concerta
- Daytrana
- Ritalin
- Quillivant
- Focalin

Non-stimulant Medication

Non-stimulant medications can be used if stimulants have not worked, caused intolerable side effects, or if pre-existing conditions exclude a patient from being able to take a stimulant medication.

Non-stimulants appear to work by increasing norepinephrine in the brain, which may increase attention span and lessen hyperactivity.

Non-stimulant medication (there are other non-stimulants a doctor could prescribe that are not included on this list):

- Atomoxetine (Strattera)
- Guanfacine (Intuiv)
- Clonidine (Kapvay)

Living with ADHD and ADD

No matter which sub-type of ADHD you may have, they are medically treated much the same way. If you choose to try medication, the same medications can be used across all three sub-types.

Symptoms and severity will be different for everyone, and this is one area that a therapist, physician or coach can assist with. Learning to use your strengths and build around your weaknesses is vital for living your best life with ADHD or ADD.