

ADULTS WITH ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER AND SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood mental disorders, and it can persist through adolescence and adulthood. The medications most commonly used to treat ADHD are stimulants, and survey data show that abuse of prescription stimulants is on the rise. This *Advisory* discusses the co-occurrence of ADHD and substance use disorders (SUDs), the misuse of prescription stimulants, and treatment and prevention approaches to these problems.

The Definition of ADHD

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.; DSM-5),¹ the essential feature of ADHD is a persistent pattern of inattention, hyperactivity-impulsivity (they are grouped together), or both that interferes with normal functioning and development.¹ The manifestations of inattention include wandering off task, lacking persistence, and being disorganized.¹ Hyperactivity includes fidgeting, tapping, and talkativeness. Impulsivity is a tendency toward heedless, hasty action. (See Exhibit 1 for DSM-5 ADHD diagnostic criteria.)

Which ADHD symptoms are most prominent varies with age and circumstance. The hyperactivity symptoms are usually the most noticeable during the preschool and elementary school years. Late in elementary and middle school, the inattention symptoms come to the fore.² Among adolescents, hyperactivity may be limited to fidgeting and be experienced as feelings of jitteriness and impatience. DSM-5 notes that ADHD symptoms wax and wane depending on the circumstance. Close supervision, a new setting, an engrossing activity, or frequent rewards for appropriate behavior may make symptoms go away temporarily.¹

Adult ADHD

For many years, experts believed that children and adolescents outgrew ADHD.³ However, research that followed children with ADHD into adulthood showed that the condition can persist into adulthood. Depending on the criteria used to define ADHD, anywhere from 15 percent (if the full criteria are used) to 65 percent (if cases classified as being in partial remission are included) of children and adolescents with ADHD continue to have the disorder when they are young adults, according to one meta-analysis.⁴

How Common Is ADHD?

International studies have shown that about 5 percent of children and adolescents have ADHD.⁵ The prevalence among adults is about half that, or between 2 percent and 3.5 percent.^{1,6} In the United States, the number of children and adolescents diagnosed with ADHD has been climbing fast. In 2011, 11 percent of children and adolescents had been diagnosed with ADHD at some time in their lives, a 42-percent increase from 2003.⁷