EP EMBRACE PSYCHIATRY
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Understanding Adult ADHD

A plain-language guide from your care team at Embrace Psychiatry

What ADHD Is

ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) is a medical condition that affects how the brain manages attention, activity level, and impulses. It is not a character flaw, a lack of willpower, or the result of bad parenting. ADHD begins in childhood, and for many people it continues into adulthood — sometimes it is not recognized until adult life, when work, school, or family demands make the symptoms harder to manage.

Researchers believe ADHD involves differences in how the brain uses chemical messengers such as dopamine and norepinephrine, especially in areas that control focus, planning, and self-control. ADHD tends to run in families.

Common Symptoms in Adults

Adult ADHD looks different from childhood ADHD. Hyperactivity often becomes an inner restlessness rather than running around a room. Common signs include:

- **Trouble sustaining attention** — drifting off in meetings, rereading the same paragraph, missing details.
- **Disorganization** — chronic lateness, lost items, messy workspaces, missed deadlines.
- **Difficulty finishing tasks** — starting many projects, completing few; procrastinating until the last minute.
- **Forgetfulness** — missing appointments, forgetting to return calls or pay bills.
- **Restlessness** — feeling "on edge," fidgeting, difficulty relaxing.
- **Acting on impulse** — interrupting others, making quick decisions, spending impulsively, blurting things out.
- **Emotional ups and downs** — quick frustration, impatience, or mood shifts (these are common but are not the same as a mood disorder).

How ADHD Is Diagnosed

There is no blood test or brain scan that diagnoses ADHD. Diagnosis is based on a careful clinical evaluation that includes:

- A detailed interview about current symptoms and how they affect daily life.
- A history going back to childhood (symptoms must have been present before age 12).
- Rating scales or questionnaires completed by you and, when possible, someone who knows you well.
- Ruling out other causes — sleep problems, anxiety, depression, thyroid issues, and substance use can look like ADHD.

An honest, complete history gives the most accurate result. Bring school records or old report cards if you have them — they can be very helpful.

Treatment Overview

ADHD treatment usually works best as a combination of approaches:

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Medication

Prescription medications are the most effective single treatment for core ADHD symptoms for many adults. Stimulant medications are usually tried first; non-stimulant options exist for people who cannot take stimulants or prefer not to. It can take some trial and adjustment to find the right medication and dose. (See our separate handout, "ADHD Medications," for details.)

Skills, therapy, and coaching

Medication improves the brain's ability to focus, but it does not teach organization. Cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) adapted for ADHD, ADHD coaching, and skills training help with planning, time management, and managing emotions. Many people do best with medication plus skills work.

Lifestyle supports

- **Sleep:** poor sleep worsens every ADHD symptom. Aim for a consistent sleep schedule.
- **Exercise:** regular physical activity improves focus and mood.
- **Structure:** calendars, reminders, checklists, and breaking tasks into small steps.
- **Limit alcohol and recreational substances:** they impair attention and can interact dangerously with ADHD medications.

What to Expect at Follow-Up Visits

After starting treatment, you will have regular follow-up visits. At these visits your provider will:

- Review your symptom ratings and how you are functioning at work, school, and home.
- Ask about side effects, sleep, appetite, mood, heart rate, and blood pressure.
- Adjust the dose or medication if needed — finding the right fit is normal and expected.
- Check prescription refill needs. **Stimulant prescriptions have strict refill rules:** they cannot be refilled early, and in most states a new prescription is required each month. Plan ahead and request refills several days before you run out.

Bring your completed symptom tracker to every visit — it makes these decisions faster and more accurate. (See "ADHD Symptom Tracker and Gap Analysis.")

When to Call the Office

- Chest pain, pounding or irregular heartbeat, fainting, or severe shortness of breath.
- New or worsening anxiety, agitation, paranoia, hallucinations, or thoughts of harming yourself.
- Severe mood changes, unusual irritability, or behavior that feels "not like you."
- Side effects that are severe or do not improve after the first week or two.
- You are running low on medication — call at least **3–5 business days** before you run out.

If you ever feel you may act on thoughts of harming yourself, call or text **988** right away, or go to your nearest emergency department. Embrace Psychiatry is not an emergency service.

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In crisis? Call or text 988, or text HOME to 741741.
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A Final Note

ADHD is a manageable condition. Many adults with ADHD build successful careers and full lives once they understand how their brain works and have the right tools. Treatment is a process, not a single appointment — stay in touch, track honestly, and give the plan time to work.

Please read: This handout is for education only and is not medical advice. Do not start, stop, or change any medication without talking to your prescriber. If you are in crisis, call or text **988** (Suicide and Crisis Lifeline) or text **HOME** to **741741**.

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