



**FIRST COAST ADVANTAGE
SERIES 3 ARTICLE**

HOW IS ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) DIAGNOSED

How is ADHD Diagnosed?

Children mature at different rates and have different personalities, temperaments, and energy levels. Most children get distracted, act impulsively, and struggle to concentrate at one time or another. Sometimes, these normal factors may be mistaken for ADHD. ADHD symptoms usually appear early in life, often between the ages of 3 and 6, and because symptoms vary from person to person, the disorder can be hard to diagnose. Parents may first notice that their child loses interest in things sooner than other children, or seems constantly “out of control.” Often, teachers notice the symptoms first, when a child has trouble following rules, or frequently “spaces out” in the classroom or on the playground.

No single test can diagnose a child as having ADHD. Instead, a licensed health professional needs to gather information about the child, and his or her behavior and environment. A family may want to first talk with the child’s pediatrician. Some pediatricians can assess the child themselves, but many will refer the family to a mental health specialist with experience in childhood mental disorders such as ADHD. The pediatrician or mental health specialist will first try to rule out other possibilities for the symptoms. For example, certain situations, events, or health conditions may cause temporary behaviors in a child that seem like ADHD.

Between them, the referring pediatrician and specialist will determine if a child:

- Is experiencing undetected seizures that could be associated with other medical conditions
- Has a middle ear infection that is causing hearing problems
- Has any undetected hearing or vision problems
- Has any medical problems that affect thinking and behavior
- Has any learning disabilities
- Has anxiety or depression, or other psychiatric problems that might cause ADHD-like symptoms
- Has been affected by a significant and sudden change, such as the death of a family member, a divorce, or parent’s job loss

A specialist will also check school and medical records for clues, to see if the child’s home or school settings appear unusually stressful or disrupted, and gather information from the child’s parents and teachers. Coaches, babysitters, and other adults who know the child well also may be consulted.

The specialist also will ask:

- Are the behaviors excessive and long-term, and do they affect all aspects of the child’s life?
- Do they happen more often in this child compared with the child’s peers?
- Are the behaviors a continuous problem or a response to a temporary situation?
- Do the behaviors occur in several settings or only in one place, such as the playground, classroom, or home?

The specialist pays close attention to the child’s behavior during different situations. Some situations are highly structured, some have less structure. Others would require the child to keep paying attention. Most children with ADHD are better able to control their behaviors in situations where they are getting individual attention and when they are free to focus on enjoyable activities. These types of situations are less important in the assessment. A child also may be evaluated to see how he or she acts in social situations, and may be given tests of intellectual ability and academic achievement to see if he or she has a learning disability. The use of standardized behavior rating scales for ADHD is recommended to fully assess reported symptoms from parents and teachers. While computerized performance tests have been used in research to study ADHD symptoms, their use in clinical diagnosis has not been established and is not routine practice. Finally, if after gathering all this information the child meets the criteria for ADHD, he or she will be diagnosed with the disorder.