

- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

ADHD often goes undetected in adults: experts

Only 10% to 25% of adults with ADHD obtain accurate diagnosis and proper treatment

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Despite available treatments, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, often goes undetected in adults, wreaking havoc on their personal and professional lives.

The abbreviation represents a class of neurodevelopmental disorders commonly diagnosed in school-age children, but they can affect any age group.

“ADHD is notoriously underdiagnosed in adults, especially in women, minorities and those older than 40,” Ari Tuckman, a psychologist in private practice in West Chester, Pa., told UPI via email. Only 10 percent to 25 percent of adults with the disorder obtain an accurate diagnosis and proper treatment, according to an article posted in October on Psychiatrist.com.

That month, investigators from 10 institutions in Europe, Africa and Australia published a review in *Psychiatry Research*, which estimated that 3.1 percent of adults have ADHD.

“An ongoing pattern” of symptoms includes inattention — “difficulty staying on task, sustaining focus and staying organized,” the National Institute of Mental Health says.

Meanwhile, hyperactivity also may be prevalent, resulting in excessive fidgeting, tapping or talking. And impulsivity can lead someone to “interrupt others or make important decisions without considering long-term consequences,” the institute notes.

The *Psychiatry Research* study identified three subtypes of ADHD — ADHD-I (inattentive type of ADHD-I), ADHD-HI (hyperactive type) and ADHD-C (combined type).

“The results indicate that ADHD is relatively high in adults, with ADHD-I remaining the most common subtype,” the study’s authors wrote. “Attention should be given to preventing, reducing, identifying and managing ADHD in adults.”

Even when mental health professionals treat adults for other psychiatric disorders, ADHD often goes unrecognized, experts say.

“If one has the idea of ADHD being a hyperactive boy, then adults who are no longer hyperactive will slip by. Or those who have the more inattentive type of ADHD will tend to slip by,” said Tuckman, who also is the conference co-chair for Children and Adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, a national advocacy organization.

As a result, adults’ struggles with ADHD often are attributed to other reasons, such as anxiety, depression, sleep problems and substance overuse. Untreated ADHD can exacerbate these conditions, he said.

However, Tuckman noted that increasing awareness of ADHD in adults has led more people to identify with the symptoms and seek out treatment for this disorder specifically, not just the anxiety, depression and other mental health issues that often accompany it.

Problems in relationships, college studies or the workplace eventually compel people to consult with a mental health professional in hopes of finding relief from ADHD symptoms with which they have lived since childhood, said Dr. Lisa MacLean, an adult psychiatrist at Henry Ford Health in Detroit. Sometimes, adults with the symptoms turn to mental health professionals after their children are diagnosed with ADHD, said MacLean, who also is chief clinical wellness officer for the Henry Ford Medical Group.

“A light bulb goes off in their head and they see how their child’s struggles are similar to theirs,” she said, adding that the disorder has a genetic component.

“Untreated ADHD can negatively impact the educational level a person can achieve,” MacLean said. For mental health professionals to diagnose someone with ADHD, they must determine that “several inattentive or hyperactive-impulsive symptoms were present prior to age 12,” according to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

“If an adult started to have symptoms clearly in adulthood, then it is unlikely to be ADHD as a primary psychiatric diagnosis,” said Dr. Britta Ostermeyer, OU health chief of psychiatry in Oklahoma City, Okla.

Other medical or psychiatric ailments may be responsible for the onset of inattention in adulthood, such as depression, substance abuse, sleep disorders, lung conditions, cardiac conditions or brain diseases, Ostermeyer said.

The reason ADHD is more likely to go undetected in adults than children stems in part from the “lack of daily contact with people adept at recognizing ADHD, such as schoolteachers,” she said, noting that adults also have fewer hyperactive symptoms than children.

Medications are the primary form of treatment for ADHD, not psychotherapy, experts say.