



# Medical Evaluation of the Child With Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

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## Why Go to the Doctor?

Parents often bring their children to the doctor's office when they or the teachers have noticed attention problems or overactivity. Sometimes the teacher or parent has said, "Get this child on medication!" The doctor must conduct a medical examination of the child before making the decision to begin using medications. You should stay with the child for at least the beginning of the exam. It also will help if you bring report cards or progress reports and examples of schoolwork for the doctor to review. If you have them, bring reports from school testing and letters from the teacher describing the child's behavior and academic work.

ADHD can be a difficult condition to diagnose. There is no simple blood test or x-ray that says a child has the disorder. The doctor compares the child's symptoms to a list of criteria described in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). Because there might be other factors causing disruptive behavior and inattention, the physician must evaluate your child's general health thoroughly as a part of the process of diagnosing ADHD. In addition, only a physician can prescribe medication for ADHD.

## The Medical History

The pediatrician or family physician will measure the child for current height, weight, and blood pressure. The doctor will obtain a medical history from you and the child and will observe the child's behavior during this interview and the examination. Be sure to mention any difficulties with the youngster's early development and any hospitalizations. Report recent use of medications or nutritional supplements. If there is a family history of attention problems and hyperactivity in close relatives such as siblings, aunts or uncles, or either parent, please inform the physician. You also should let the doctor know if the child has been exposed to lead in the home because this can lead to behaviors resembling ADHD.

## A Good Look

The doctor's physical examination of the child focuses on any of the problems that might be causing your child to be distractible. For example, the doctor will evaluate your child's vision and hearing carefully and make recommendations for treatment, if necessary. There might be signs of

allergic irritation in the child's nose, throat, or lungs. The doctor will check your child's neck and possibly muscle reflexes to detect thyroid disorders, which also can cause hyperactivity. The doctor also will look for any signs of frequent physical injuries or conditions that could be causing the child pain. This is an opportunity to review with the doctor any other symptoms the child is having that concern you.

## Further Studies

Depending on what he or she finds during the history and physical examination, the doctor might recommend blood tests for thyroid problems, allergies, or lead poisoning. Occasionally, the primary care doctor will want a brain wave test (EEG) or an x-ray of the brain (MRI or CT scan). Sometimes the physician will recommend an evaluation by a specialist such as a neurologist or a psychologist. The psychologist might use specialized testing to evaluate the child's verbal skills, problem-solving abilities, and visual-motor skills. The psychologist also might administer academic tests of reading, spelling, and arithmetic. These tests can detect learning problems that occur instead of or in addition to ADHD. Your child might not need these specialized tests and consultations.

Additionally, the doctor frequently will send the parents home with a questionnaire about the child's behavior. These checklists ask the parent or the teacher to rate how often the child shows different behaviors. Complete these behavioral checklists at a quiet time when you can answer the questions thoroughly and honestly. After you return the forms, the doctor scores the information and considers it before diagnosing the child with ADHD.

## Skills as Treatment

If your child meets the criteria for the diagnosis of Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder, your physician might recommend behavioral treatments such as specialized teaching methods or a change in environment. Some schools have teachers who have received specialized training with children who have ADHD. Frequently they will recommend positive reinforcement and list-making skills. Some children improve by participation in such activities as scouting, sports, or martial arts, which can teach self-discipline and reward individual talents.

## **Pills as Treatment**

Your doctor might prescribe medication to treat your child's ADHD symptoms. Methylphenidate (Ritalin) is the most common stimulant medication. These medications wake up the brain to use the attention centers. The medications often begin to help the child right from the start. Most of the time, children take the medication two or three times a day. There are strict laws to control who can give these medications.

You and your child should consider stimulants such as Ritalin as a tool to help the child pay attention, just as eyeglasses help people with poor eyesight to see better. Your child might use the medicine for several years, but he or she also must continue to work on improving behavioral skills. Ask your physician any questions you have about the medications, and report any side effects of the medicine (nervous movements, sleep problems, stomachaches). Your child might need to avoid these medications if anyone in the house would abuse them.

Some children under 10 can't swallow tablets. You can ask your physician to request that the pharmacist make Ritalin in a liquid suspension form. Other medications come in a sprinkle form (Dexedrine spansule) or chewable tablets (Cylert).

## **The Big Picture**

The physician's evaluation is important in securing the diagnosis of ADHD. The doctor will go through several steps to look for other causes of difficulties with attention and hyperactivity. If the doctor does diagnose ADHD, there are treatments that will allow your child to succeed in school. You will need to work with your child's teachers to help your child succeed academically. As a parent, you can be a great advocate for the child and make sure that your child reaches his or her full potential. The physician is also an important part of this team, and communication between you and your child's doctor and teachers will help provide the best possible treatment package.

## **References and Resources**

American Psychiatric Association. (1994). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (4th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

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