



HOPE Newsletter - Issue 70

Your child's ADHD diagnosis could be wrong, leaving other issues untreated

Inattention and distractibility are caused by many medical conditions and life situations. Your child may not have ADHD or ADD if they didn't show signs when they were young.

Children don't just catch ADHD or ADD

If your child has a behavioral change you haven't seen before, there may be an underlying medical or co-occurring mental disorder that's causing ADHD symptoms... especially if they're on ADHD-ADD medications which are not working well.

"It is vital not to mistake another medical or psychiatric condition as ADHD."

— *Richa Bhatia, MD, Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association*

The medical conditions listed below produce ADHD and/or ADD symptoms such as slow processing speed, impulsive behavior, and limited attention and focus.

- **Epileptic seizures:** some types cause a brief freeze in thinking—the child's brain goes blank for a few moments ("absence seizures")
- **Diseases of the brain:** Lyme disease, HIV infection, parasitic and viral infections, brain tumors
- **Brain damage** from head injury or toxins (e.g. narcotics)
- **Chemotherapy** side-effects, "stupor"
- **Hypothyroidism.** Too little thyroid hormone results in memory, attention, and concentration problems. It decreases blood flow in brain regions that mediate attention and executive functioning (the hippocampus and cerebral cortexes).
- **Hyperthyroidism.** At the other extreme, too much thyroid hormone causes anxiety and tension, irritability and impatience, and hyperactivity and distraction.
- **Sleep apnea.** A condition where a child stops breathing during sleep, for a few seconds to a few minutes several times per night. The following day, the child

can't pay attention, remember, or follow a sequence of steps. It also causes hyperactivity and belligerence.

Mental health disorders with ADHD-like symptoms:

Anxiety disorders are common to most other mental health conditions, and create problems with concentration. The chronic stress from anxiety affects the brain regions responsible for memory and cognitive functions. If a child does not have a history of ADHD symptoms, than significant and pervasive anxiety may be the cause of inattention and distraction.

Abuse or trauma. Difficulty concentrating is one of the core symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and recent abuse or trauma can cause agitation, restlessness, and behavioral disturbance—symptoms that mimic ADHD.

Depression – Difficulty concentrating also is a criterion for major depressive disorder.

Bipolar disorder – ADHD symptoms are apparent in children with suspected bipolar disorder. Both disorders can cause distractibility, increased energy, and instant mood swings. (Some children are eventually diagnosed with both disorders.)

Drug abuse using marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, produce similar symptoms of ADHD because they affect the same brain regions affected by anxiety. MRI scans of the brain were taken of young children who were exposed to cocaine in the womb. The scans revealed frontal lobe malformations which predicted long-term problems with attention and impulse control.

Common stimulant foods and beverages with excess caffeine or sugar

Insomnia from medical conditions. Sleep plays a huge role in memory and attention. Sleep disorders (e.g., sleep apnea, restless legs syndrome) can produce chronic tiredness and significantly reduce attention, concentration, and cognitive functioning in children, adolescents, and adults.

Plain old lack of sleep in healthy children can cause inattention and reduce academic achievement. There are many causes of sleep loss: early school hours; screen time at least an hour before bed (because the blue light suppresses sleepiness); or allowing the use of technology in the bedroom at nighttime. What helps getting to sleep and staying asleep:

- A cool, dark room
- Thirty minutes of reading or drawing *on paper* before lights out.
- Removing phones, laptops, or desktops from the bedroom at night.

Learning disorders: Children with an undiagnosed learning disorder often present with ADHD symptoms. An undiagnosed reading or mathematics disorder (dyslexia), or an autism spectrum disorder that's not yet diagnosed, can have a significant impact on classroom behavior. The child might not be paying attention because of his (her) restricted ability to grasp the subject matter, or because they are frustrated and irritated with the struggle to keep up.

Caution: Teachers often report a student's inattention and confused thinking to parents, and suggest a diagnosis of ADHD when the real problem may be lack of sleep or something else. It's useful to hear classroom observations of your child, but teachers are not trained in mental health diagnosis—get a second opinion from a professional!

More on the consequences of untreated ADHD or another underlying disorder is in this article: "[ADHD kids become troubled adults](#)."

–Margaret

Subject matter was drawn from this article by psychiatrist Dr. Richa Bhatia.

“Rule out these causes of inattention before diagnosing ADHD”

Richa Bhatia, MD, FAPA, *Current Psychiatry*. 2016 October; 15(10):32-C3

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