ADHD Symptoms, Types and Diagnosis: A Guide for Families and Adults

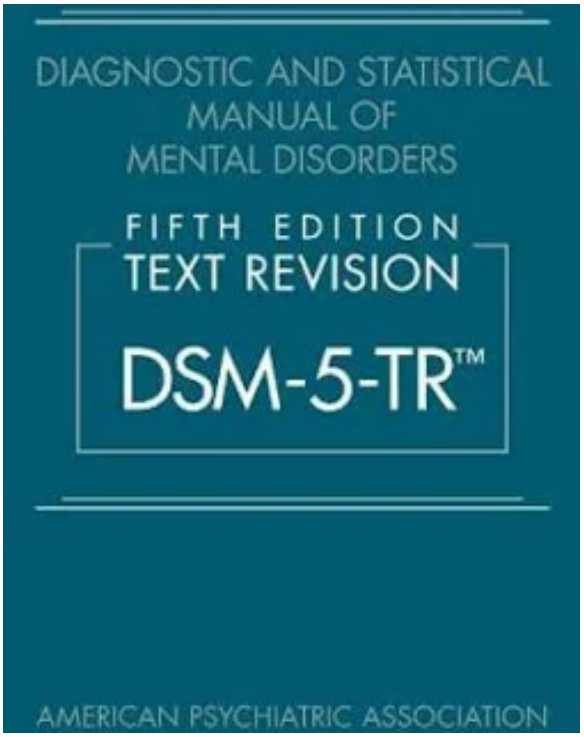
ADHD does not always show up as hyperactivity. Many children diagnosed with ADHD are well-behaved, polite, and have average or even above-average intelligence. Despite this, they may struggle with inattention, distractibility, fidgeting, impulsive mistakes. ADHD diagnosis at BNC in Melbourne follows the criteria outlined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR) and Australian Clinical guidelines. This assessment process helps our psychologists accurately identify ADHD and recommend the most suitable support for each child.

- **Looking specifically for child ADHD assessment? See our dedicated guide.**
- **Concerned about long waits? See our guide to ADHD assessment wait times at BNC and in Melbourne.**
- **Wondering how the 2026 GP diagnosis reforms affect you? See our full guide to getting an ADHD diagnosis in Victoria.**

Ready to book? Adult ADHD assessment | Child and teen ADHD assessment

The Three Types of ADHD and Their Symptoms

According to the DSM-5-TR, there are three subtypes of ADHD:



1. ADHD, Predominantly Inattentive Subtype.

This subtype is diagnosed if there are mostly symptoms of inattention along with fewer or no symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity.
A child with inattentive ADHD may not pay attention to details or make careless mistakes. This child may have difficulty sustaining attention in tasks and play and may listen when spoken to directly. Often this child does not follow requests, complete schoolwork, and chores. They may have organisational difficulties or be forgetful, losing necessary things like pencils and books. They may be reluctant to engage in tasks that require sustained mental effort. Family life could be filled with arguments about homework.

2. ADHD, Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive Subtype.

T**his subtype is diagnosed if there are many symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity along with fewer symptoms of inattention.**
Symptoms include frequent fidgetiness with hands and/or feet or squirming when required to sit still. This child is likely to have difficulty playing or engaging in activities quietly. They may be constantly on the go or talk excessively. Often this child gets up from their seat in class or in other situations where remaining seated is

expected. They may run and climb at inappropriate times. As they move into adolescence and adulthood, these ‘active’ behaviours often subside, but their restlessness usually remains. The impulsive child blurts out answers before the question has been finished and has difficulty waiting their turn. Consequently, they interrupt and disrupt games and conversations, and they often act without thinking.

3. ADHD, Combined Subtype.

This subtype is when the symptoms of both inattention and hyperactivity-impulsivity co-occur.
Caution. Because we all show some of these behaviours across the lifetime, the DSM-V-TR contains specific guidelines for determining whether ADHD is present. The behaviours must appear early in life, before age 7, and continue for at least 6 months. The behaviours must be more frequent and/or severe than others of the same age. The behaviours must cause significant functional impairment in at least two areas of the person’s life (school, work, home or social life).

How ADHD Is Diagnosed

A psychologist gathers a detailed history, including symptoms, medical issues, medications, family history, and social/environmental factors. In Victoria, ADHD diagnosis for the purpose of prescribing stimulant medication requires a paediatrician or psychiatrist.

- **Symptom Assessment:** Use of standardised ADHD rating scales or questionnaires (e.g., Vanderbilt, Conners-4) filled out by the patient, parents, teachers, or others who know the individual well.
- **Ruling Out Other Conditions:** Screening for other medical, psychological, or learning disorders that could explain symptoms (like anxiety, depression, sleep disorders, or learning disabilities), other questionnaires may be assigned for screening.
- **Diagnostic Criteria:** Evaluation of symptoms against DSM-5-TR criteria for ADHD, considering factors like age of onset, duration, and settings in which symptoms occur.

- **Collateral Information:** Gathering observations from multiple sources (parents, teachers, caregivers) to confirm symptoms are present in more than one setting.
- **Functional Impairment Assessment:** Determining whether symptoms significantly impair academic, occupational, or social functioning.

ADHD treatment for Adults & Children

Pharmacological Treatment: Stimulant medications, are recommended as first-line pharmacotherapy due to their evidence of efficacy and safety in reducing core ADHD symptoms. Medication should be carefully titrated and monitored, considering potential side effects and coexisting conditions such as anxiety (AADPA, 2022).
Psychosocial Interventions: Behavioural therapies, particularly cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT), parent training, and school-based support, are essential components of comprehensive ADHD management. These interventions address emotional regulation, oppositional behaviours, and functional impairments, complementing medication benefits (AADPA, 2022).
Lifestyle and Nutritional Considerations: The guidelines highlight the role of lifestyle factors, recommending regular physical activity, sleep hygiene, and nutritional assessment to support symptom management and overall well-being. Dietary interventions should focus on balanced nutrition and correction of deficiencies but are adjunctive rather than primary treatments (AADPA, 2022).

ADHD in Adults

Many adults have lived with undiagnosed ADHD for decades, often mistaking chronic disorganisation, procrastination or emotional overwhelm for personal failings rather than a treatable neurodevelopmental condition. A diagnosis later in life is common and often brings real relief. For what an adult assessment involves, the tools we use, costs and wait times, see our adult ADHD assessment page.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can a psychologist diagnose ADHD, or do I need a psychiatrist or paediatrician? +

A registered psychologist can conduct the full diagnostic assessment and provide an ADHD diagnosis. In Victoria, a paediatrician or psychiatrist is only needed if stimulant medication is being considered, since they're the ones who can prescribe it. Many people are assessed and diagnosed by a psychologist and referred on for medication only if that's part of the plan.

Can adults be diagnosed with ADHD for the first time? +

Yes. Many adults reach adulthood without ever being assessed, often mistaking lifelong disorganisation, procrastination or emotional overwhelm for personal shortcomings rather than ADHD. BNC provides comprehensive ADHD assessments for adults of all ages, including those seeking a late diagnosis.

Is medication the only treatment for ADHD? +

No. While stimulant medication is recommended as first-line pharmacological treatment due to its evidence base, psychosocial interventions such as cognitive-behavioural therapy, parent training and school-based support are also essential, alongside lifestyle factors like physical activity, sleep and nutrition. Treatment is usually a combination tailored to the individual.

Can ADHD be mistaken for anxiety, a learning disability, or something else? +

Yes, this is common. A proper ADHD assessment includes screening for other conditions that can look similar or co-occur, such as anxiety, depression, sleep disorders and learning disabilities, to make sure the diagnosis (or diagnoses) accurately reflects what's actually going on.

What's the difference between the three types of ADHD? +

The DSM-5-TR recognises three subtypes: Predominantly Inattentive (difficulty sustaining attention, disorganisation and forgetfulness, with few hyperactive symptoms), Predominantly Hyperactive-Impulsive (fidgeting, restlessness, interrupting and difficulty staying seated, with fewer attention difficulties), and Combined type, where both sets of symptoms are present. Which subtype applies affects how ADHD shows up day-to-day and can shape the assessment and support plan.

How long does an ADHD assessment take? +

For both children and adults, an ADHD assessment at BNC typically involves 2 to 3 sessions over 2 to 4 weeks: a detailed clinical interview, standardised rating scales completed by the individual and by others who know them well, and a feedback session with a full written report.

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