Dyscalculia: Signs, Assessment and Support

Dyscalculia is a specific learning disorder that affects a person's ability to understand numbers and learn maths facts. In the DSM-5 it falls under the diagnosis of **Specific Learning Disorder, with impairment in mathematics**. Like dyslexia and dysgraphia, dyscalculia is not related to intelligence – many people with dyscalculia are bright and capable in other areas, but struggle specifically with number sense, calculation and maths reasoning.

Signs of Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia can look different at different ages. Some of the more common signs include:

Early Childhood

- Difficulty recognising numbers or matching numbers to quantities
- Trouble learning to count, or skipping numbers well past the age when peers have moved on
- Difficulty recognising patterns, or sorting objects by size, shape or number

School Age

- Difficulty learning and recalling basic maths facts (addition, subtraction, times tables)
- Trouble understanding maths symbols (+, −, ×, ÷) and what they mean

- Difficulty with word problems, and working out which operation to use
- Poor sense of estimation – struggling to judge whether an answer is reasonable
- Difficulty telling time on an analogue clock, or understanding time-related concepts
- Anxiety or avoidance around maths homework and tests

Beyond the Classroom

- Difficulty with mental maths, remembering phone numbers, or reading measurements
- Trouble managing money, budgeting, or working out change
- Getting lost easily, or confusing left and right
- Difficulty judging distance or speed, for example when driving

Causes and Related Conditions

Not every child who dislikes or struggles with maths has dyscalculia – anxiety, gaps in teaching, or a mismatch in learning style can all affect maths performance. Dyscalculia is a distinct, persistent difficulty with number sense that does not resolve with extra practice alone.

Dyscalculia often overlaps with other conditions. Around half of children with a learning disorder have more than one, and dyscalculia frequently co-occurs with dyslexia, ADHD, and difficulties with visual-spatial processing or working memory. Because of this overlap, a comprehensive assessment is important to understand the full picture, rather than assuming a maths difficulty is a stand-alone issue.

How is Dyscalculia Assessed?

There is no single test that diagnoses dyscalculia. At BNC, assessment typically combines a cognitive (IQ) assessment, such as the WISC or WAIS, with a standardised academic achievement measure such as the WIAT, which includes specific subtests for numerical operations and maths problem-solving. Comparing cognitive ability with academic performance helps identify a genuine, unexpected gap in maths skills relative to a person's overall ability – the hallmark of a specific

learning disorder. We also take a developmental and educational history, and consider commonly co-occurring conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia and anxiety.

Assessment and Support at BNC

Our psychologists provide comprehensive learning assessments for children, adolescents and adults, both in person and via Telehealth. A GP referral (Mental Health Treatment Plan or paediatrician referral) may allow you to claim a Medicare rebate for eligible sessions. Following assessment, we provide a detailed report with practical recommendations for school, home and, where relevant, tutoring or allied health support.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is dyscalculia?+

Dyscalculia is a specific learning disorder that affects a person's ability to understand numbers, learn maths facts and carry out calculations. It is a recognised diagnosis under the DSM-5 category of Specific Learning Disorder, with impairment in mathematics.

Is dyscalculia the same as being "bad at maths"?+

No. Many people find maths challenging without having dyscalculia. Dyscalculia refers to a persistent, unexpected difficulty with number sense and calculation that is out of step with a person's overall cognitive ability, and doesn't improve with typical extra practice or teaching.

What is the difference between dyscalculia and dyslexia?+

Dyslexia is a specific learning disorder affecting reading and language processing, while dyscalculia affects number sense and maths. The two can occur separately or together – many people with one also have signs of the

other, which is why a broad assessment is recommended.

At what age can dyscalculia be diagnosed?+

Signs can appear as early as preschool, but a formal diagnosis is usually made once a child is old enough for standardised testing, typically from around age 6–7 onwards, once maths instruction has begun in earnest at school.

Can dyscalculia be treated?+

There is no medication for dyscalculia, but the right support makes a significant difference. This can include targeted maths intervention, classroom accommodations (such as extra time or visual aids), and strategies developed collaboratively between school, family and treating professionals.

Does Medicare cover a dyscalculia assessment?+

With a referral from a GP or paediatrician, eligible clients may be able to claim a Medicare rebate for a portion of psychology sessions under a Mental Health Treatment Plan. Contact our clinic for current details on assessment fees and rebates.

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