Who Diagnoses ADHD in Australia and What Happens?



A parent may have heard similar concerns from a teacher for months. An adult may recognise a lifelong pattern of missed deadlines, disorganisation or intense effort simply to keep up. The next question is often practical: **who diagnoses ADHD** and where should you start? In Australia, assessment can involve several health professionals, each with a different role in identifying ADHD, considering other explanations and planning appropriate support.

Who diagnoses ADHD in Australia?

ADHD is diagnosed through a comprehensive clinical assessment by an appropriately qualified health professional with experience in ADHD and neurodevelopmental presentations. Depending on a person's age, circumstances and treatment needs, this may include a psychologist, paediatrician or psychiatrist.

There is no single blood test, brain scan or online questionnaire that can confirm ADHD. Questionnaires can provide useful information, but they are only one part of the picture. A sound assessment considers whether a person's attention, impulsivity and hyperactivity symptoms have been present over time, occur across relevant settings and create meaningful difficulties in daily life.

The clinician also needs to consider whether another condition, life circumstance or developmental factor could better explain the concerns. Anxiety, depression, sleep difficulties, learning differences, trauma, autism, substance use and some medical conditions can overlap with, accompany or resemble ADHD. This is why a brief screening alone is not the same as a diagnostic assessment.

The role of a GP

For many people, a GP is the most useful first point of contact. They can listen to the concerns, review relevant health history, consider physical health factors and discuss referral options. A GP may refer a child to a paediatrician or psychologist, or an adult to a psychologist or psychiatrist, depending on the presentation and the care being sought.

GPs also play an important part in coordinating ongoing healthcare. If Medicare-rebate pathways are relevant, a GP can advise whether a Mental Health Care Plan or other eligible referral may be suitable. Eligibility and rebate arrangements depend on the service and individual circumstances.

The role of a psychologist

A psychologist with relevant assessment experience can conduct a detailed ADHD assessment and provide diagnostic support. This commonly involves clinical

interviews, developmental history, standardised rating scales and information from people who know the person well. Psychologists can also assess related concerns such as anxiety, mood, behaviour, executive functioning, learning and emotional regulation.

For children and adolescents, information from parents or carers and school staff is often particularly valuable. For adults, the assessment may include reflection on childhood experiences, school reports where available, work history, relationships and current daily functioning. A psychologist can also provide evidence-based psychological therapy and practical strategies after assessment, whether or not ADHD is identified.

A psychological assessment can be central to clarifying a person's needs. Where medication is being considered, further consultation with a medical specialist may be required.

The role of a paediatrician or psychiatrist

Paediatricians commonly assess and diagnose ADHD in children and adolescents. They can consider developmental and medical factors, discuss treatment options and, where clinically appropriate and permitted under relevant state or territory requirements, manage medication.

Psychiatrists assess ADHD across the lifespan, including adults seeking a diagnosis later in life. They can consider more complex mental health presentations, diagnostic overlap and medication options. A psychiatrist may work alongside a psychologist whose assessment has provided detailed evidence about symptoms, functioning and co-occurring concerns.

The most appropriate professional depends on the person's age, the complexity of the presentation, whether medication is being considered and the kind of ongoing support required. Assessment and treatment do not always need to occur with one practitioner, provided there is clear communication and consent.

What does a comprehensive ADHD assessment involve?

A thorough assessment is not designed to test whether someone is trying hard enough or to make a judgement about parenting, intelligence or character. Its purpose is to understand patterns of functioning and identify the support that may be helpful.

The process usually begins with a detailed clinical interview. The clinician asks about current concerns and how they affect areas such as education, work, home responsibilities, friendships, relationships, finances and emotional wellbeing. They will ask about the timing of symptoms because ADHD features begin in childhood, even if they were not recognised at the time.

For children, the assessment may explore early development, family history, behaviour at home, learning, peer relationships and feedback from school. A child who appears settled in one setting may still be working very hard to manage attention or behaviour in another, so understanding more than one context matters.

For adults, the discussion may cover school experiences, employment patterns, driving, time management, household tasks, sleep, organisation and the strategies they have developed to cope. Some adults have achieved highly in certain areas while experiencing significant strain behind the scenes. Academic or professional success does not, by itself, rule ADHD in or out.

Standardised questionnaires may be completed by the person being assessed and, where appropriate, parents, partners, teachers or other informants. The clinician may review school reports, previous assessments or relevant medical information with consent. Cognitive, learning or behavioural assessments may also be recommended when the clinical picture suggests they would add useful information.

The final feedback should explain the findings in clear language. It may identify ADHD, another condition, a combination of factors, or an area requiring further assessment. Equally importantly, it should provide a considered pathway for support rather than leaving a person with a label and no next steps.

Choosing the right clinician for an ADHD assessment

When arranging an assessment, it is reasonable to ask whether the clinician works with your age group and has experience assessing ADHD alongside related conditions. Children, adolescents and adults can present differently, and ADHD may be less obvious where anxiety, masking, learning difficulties or emotional regulation concerns are also present.

It is also useful to ask what the assessment includes, who will be involved, whether school or family information is requested, how feedback is provided and whether a written report is available. If medication may be part of the discussion, ask how the clinician coordinates with a paediatrician, psychiatrist or GP.

A short appointment focused only on a checklist may be appropriate as an initial screening conversation, but it may not answer the broader diagnostic questions. A comprehensive approach takes more time because it considers history, context, impairment and alternative explanations.

Referrals, telehealth and ongoing support

You do not always need to have every referral arranged before seeking information about an ADHD assessment. However, a GP referral can be helpful for coordinating care and may be needed for particular Medicare-rebate pathways. It is sensible to check current requirements before booking, particularly if you are seeking a rebate.

Telehealth can make specialist assessment more accessible for people outside metropolitan Melbourne or those managing work, school or family commitments. Whether telehealth is appropriate depends on the person's age, the assessment requirements, privacy at home and the clinician's professional judgement. Some people may benefit from a mix of Zoom and in-person appointments.

At Behavioural Neurotherapy Clinic in Doncaster, comprehensive assessment and therapeutic support are available for children, adolescents and adults, with in-person Melbourne appointments and Australia-wide telehealth consultations. The focus is on

understanding the whole clinical picture and developing a practical plan for the person's circumstances.

If ADHD is identified, support may include psychological therapy, behavioural strategies, education about ADHD, school or workplace recommendations, family support and medical consultation where relevant. If it is not identified, the assessment can still clarify what may be contributing to the difficulties and what support to discuss next.

The most helpful first step is usually not finding the fastest label. It is finding a clinician and process that can carefully listen to the concerns, consider the full history and provide clear guidance about what comes next.

For more information

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