

How ADHD Is Diagnosed in Women

There is no single test that can tell you whether you have ADHD. ADHD is diagnosed by looking at a pattern: what has been difficult, how long it has been happening, where it shows up, and how it affects your life. For women, this process can be more complicated than it sounds.



WHY THIS OFTEN LOOKS DIFFERENT IN WOMEN



You may have spent years compensating. Your strengths and coping strategies can hide the difficulties.



Other conditions are often considered first. You may have been treated for anxiety, depression, sleep problems, or burnout before ADHD is considered.



Symptoms can look different. Less visible symptoms (like daydreaming, internal restlessness, or emotional intensity) are often missed.



Looking successful does not rule it out. High achievement, organization, or doing well in school can coexist with ADHD.

Strong effort, high achievement, or looking organized does not rule out ADHD.

What Happens During an ADHD Assessment?

A good ADHD assessment looks at your life over time. The clinician is trying to understand whether there has been a persistent ADHD pattern beginning earlier in life, whether it occurs in more than one part of your life, and whether something else might better explain what you are experiencing.

THE CLINICIAN WILL USUALLY ASK ABOUT:

- ☐ Attention and distractibility
- ☐ Working memory and forgetfulness
- ☐ Task starting and follow-through
- ☐ Organization and planning
- ☐ Time awareness
- ☐ Impulsivity or restlessness
- ☐ Difficulty shifting between tasks
- ☐ School and work
- ☐ Relationships and home life
- ☐ Childhood experiences
- ☐ Current stress, sleep, health, and mental health



Questionnaires may be part of the assessment, but a questionnaire alone does not diagnose ADHD.



There is no brain scan, blood test, computerized attention test, or neuropsychological test that can independently confirm or rule out ADHD.



Some clinicians use a structured interview (such as the DIVA-5), which looks at ADHD symptoms and impairment in both childhood and adulthood.

Diagnosis is based on a comprehensive picture, not a single test or questionnaire.

Screening, QbTest, and What They Can Tell You

SCREENING IS NOT THE SAME AS DIAGNOSIS

You may be asked to complete an ADHD questionnaire before or during an evaluation. One commonly used screener is the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale (ASRS).



Can help identify whether a fuller assessment may be worth pursuing.



A high score is not a diagnosis.



A low score does not automatically rule out ADHD when there are longstanding concerns.

WHERE QBTEST FITS



QbTest combines a computerized attention task with movement tracking. It provides information about performance during that task. It does not capture a person's full developmental history or everyday functioning.

NICE recommends QbTest as an optional addition to standard clinical assessment for ages 6-17. This recommendation should not be presented as evidence that the test can independently diagnose ADHD in adult women.



If a computerized test is proposed, ask:

- What will it add?
- How will results be interpreted alongside your history?
- What happens if the test and your everyday experience differ?

Neither a reassuring score nor an unusual score should settle the diagnosis on its own.

Childhood ADHD May Not Have Looked Obvious

ADHD begins in childhood, but you do not need to have been diagnosed as a child or have been failing school. An ADHD girl may have had many of these experiences:

- ☐ Daydreamed or seemed distracted
- ☐ Forgotten instructions
- ☐ Procrastinated on homework
- ☐ Talked constantly
- ☐ Lost things
- ☐ Become overwhelmed easily
- ☐ Stayed up late finishing assignments
- ☐ Depended heavily on parents or teachers to stay organized



SOME GIRLS COMPENSATE VERY WELL

They may work twice as long, become perfectionistic, overprepare, or use anxiety to make sure things get done. Looking successful from the outside does not tell us how much effort was required to maintain that success.



Many women only recognize their ADHD in adulthood when the demands of work, relationships, or life increases and their coping strategies are no longer enough.

Why ADHD Can Be Missed in Women

ADHD has historically been recognized more easily when it looks disruptive. That can leave women whose difficulties are less visible unnoticed. You may have been told:



"You did well in school."

"You have a successful career."

"You are too organized to have ADHD."

"You don't seem hyperactive."

But none of those things rules out ADHD.

A better question is often:

"What has it taken for you to keep everything going?"

Someone may appear organized because she checks everything repeatedly. She may meet deadlines because anxiety keeps her working late. She may look calm because she has learned to suppress movement, interrupting, emotional reactions, or signs of overwhelm.

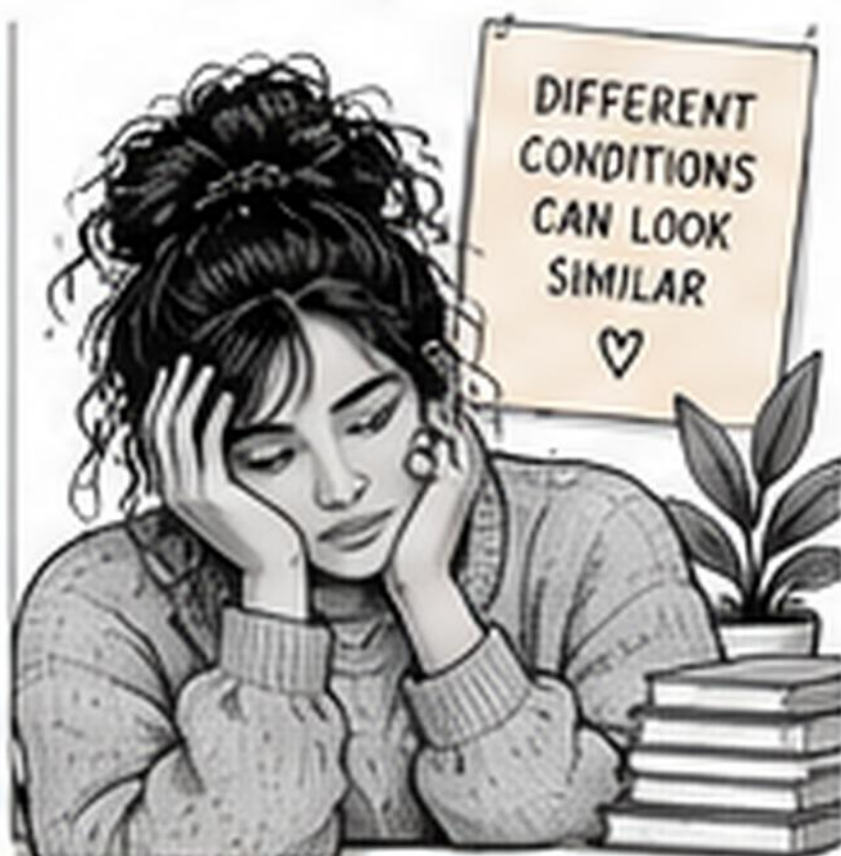
The compensation can hide the difficulty.

ADHD Can Be Mistaken for Something Else

Many women reach adulthood with other diagnoses before ADHD is considered. Anxiety, depression, trauma, sleep problems, hormonal changes, and ADHD can sometimes look similar. It is important for the clinician to explore all of these possibilities, not just ADHD.

CONDITIONS THAT MAY OVERLAP

- ☐ Anxiety
- ☐ Depression
- ☐ Trauma or PTSD
- ☐ Sleep problems
- ☐ Hormonal changes
(e.g., postpartum, perimenopause)
- ☐ Autism
- ☐ Burnout
- ☐ Other mental health or medical conditions



A CAREFUL ASSESSMENT CONSIDERS:

-  Your full history and current symptoms
-  How symptoms have changed over time
-  Whether symptoms occur in more than one area of life
-  Whether another condition might better explain what you are experiencing

**Having another diagnosis does not rule out ADHD.
Some conditions can exist alongside ADHD.**

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How Women Often Experience ADHD Symptoms

ADHD can look different in women. Along with the more well known symptoms, many women experience:

ATTENTION AND FOCUS

- ☐ Daydreaming
- ☐ Difficulty sustaining attention
- ☐ Easily distracted
- ☐ Mind wandering
- ☐ Trouble listening in conversations
- ☐ Missing important details

EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

- ☐ Difficulty starting tasks
- ☐ Trouble with follow-through
- ☐ Organization challenges
- ☐ Time awareness difficulties
- ☐ Procrastination
- ☐ Difficulty shifting between tasks

EMOTIONS

- ☐ Intense emotions
- ☐ Feeling overwhelmed easily
- ☐ Sensitivity to rejection
- ☐ Difficulty regulating emotions
- ☐ Increased stress with criticism or conflict

BEHAVIOR AND ENERGY

- ☐ Internal restlessness
- ☐ Fidgeting or feeling "on edge"
- ☐ Impulsivity (e.g., spending, speaking)
- ☐ Difficulty waiting
- ☐ Needing more recovery time
- ☐ Changes in sleep and energy



Everyone experiences ADHD differently.
You do not need to have all of these symptoms to be diagnosed.

Getting a Helpful and Supportive Assessment

Here are some questions you can ask and things to keep in mind when seeking an ADHD assessment as a woman.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

- ☐ What is included in the assessment?
- ☐ Will you look at my childhood and current functioning?
- ☐ Do you consider how ADHD can present differently in women?
- ☐ Will you also consider other possible explanations for my symptoms?
- ☐ If a test like QbTest is used, what will it add and how will you interpret it?
- ☐ What happens if the test results and my everyday experience differ?

THINGS TO LOOK FOR



A clinician who understands how ADHD can present in women.



A comprehensive assessment that looks at your whole history.



Space to talk about your strengths and your challenges.



A curiosity about your unique experience.



Respect for your perspective and lived experience.



A thoughtful assessment can bring relief, understanding, and new support — even if the answer is not ADHD.