

# ADHD in Women

ADHD was originally defined based on the observed behaviours of young boys, and it has long been thought to primarily affect males. Modern research tells us, however, that ADHD is not gender biased. Although males are still more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD in practice, the reality is that women experience the same type, number, and severity of symptoms as do males with the condition.

Women may be even more affected by their ADHD as it can remain undiagnosed for a long time. Research and practice are both improving in attempt to address the imbalance.

## The challenges of identifying ADHD in women

**Inattentive ADHD:** Women are more likely to experience inattentive symptoms to a greater extent than the hyperactive and/or impulsive symptoms, which are more commonly associated with the male presentation. The inattentive sub-type can be subtle and more difficult to recognise. If you have inattentive ADHD, you're more likely to have difficulties with concentration, organisation, and memory.

**Internalising emotions, masking, and compensatory behaviours:** Women often internalise how they feel, and they can 'mask' their symptoms in an effort to adhere to social norms and expectations. By doing so, they soon learn to compensate for many of their challenges. Although compensatory behaviours can be helpful, women with ADHD may appear as though they are in control of things, and as such, their challenges often remain hidden from others. This, in turn, complicates inner feelings and emotions for women with ADHD.

The mean age of ADHD diagnosis in women that have not been diagnosed as children is **36 to 38 years** of age. This may be because of other disorders, or their children being diagnosed with ADHD.

## Other related conditions

There are various other disorders that co-occur with ADHD in women, and many symptoms that 'overlap' with other conditions. These complications can correct ADHD diagnose difficult:

- Autism (ASD)
- Depression and Anxiety
- Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Eating Disorders
- Bipolar Disorder
- Sleeping Disorders
- Substance Misuse Disorders
- Personality Disorders (e.g., EUPD)

## Potential outcomes for undiagnosed women

Women with undiagnosed ADHD can experience significant challenges in daily life without identifying the cause. They often fail to understand themselves, and societal expectations, particularly regarding gender norms, which can make women feel misunderstood by others too. This can significantly impact self-esteem, mental and emotional wellbeing, physical health, and social avenues.

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If ADHD is misdiagnosed, it is likely that women will not receive the treatment that they need to experience meaningful change in their lives.

## ADHD and female hormones

Studies show that hormonal fluctuations and transitional periods in a woman's life appear to influence the symptoms of ADHD.

### The menstrual cycle

Oestrogen is a key hormone that impacts the neurotransmitters in the brain required for attention, emotional regulation, organisational skills, and memory. Studies have shown that the first two weeks of the menstrual cycle are smoother for ADHD women (due to a rise in oestrogen) compared to the end of the cycle (when progesterone increases). Progesterone ultimately decreases the beneficial effects of oestrogens on the brain and may even decrease the effectiveness of ADHD medication as well. It has also been suggested that women with ADHD may experience more severe pre-menstrual symptoms than women without ADHD.

### The perinatal and postnatal periods

Research into ADHD within pregnancy is limited, but the hormonal changes associated with this period appear to both positively and negatively impact symptom presentation. Whilst oestrogen levels increase during pregnancy – leading to a decrease in the severity of symptoms – women do appear to experience more inattentive difficulties (e.g., distractibility) as they begin to focus on maternity and their new role. During the postnatal period, oestrogen levels decrease very rapidly, as do dopamine levels, which may worsen symptoms and result in depressed mood and anxiety. Post-natal depression is very common, but it seems that women with ADHD are more susceptible to this condition. Lack of sleep combined with the stresses of new routines and responsibilities can make ADHD symptoms harder to manage.



### Will hormone levels impact my response to medication?

Everybody responds to medication differently. Generally, lower levels of oestrogen are often associated with less effectiveness from or less response to stimulant medications. Progesterone may also limit the potency of some medications.

## What can you do to help yourself as a woman with ADHD?

- **Address myths:** The easiest thing you can do is educate yourself about ADHD in women
- If you're comfortable, **be open about your diagnosis.** Talk to others about how it affects you
- **Know your cycle and your symptoms.** Use an app (e.g., 'Me v PMDD') to monitor symptom counts/severity throughout your monthly cycle. Identifying when you are at your best and worst will help you make important lifestyle adjustments. If you feel that your hormones are severely impacting your ADHD, talk to a doctor to discuss treatment options
- **Seek professional support.** Specialist ADHD services understand the challenges faced by women with ADHD and will be able to offer medical and/or psychological support

