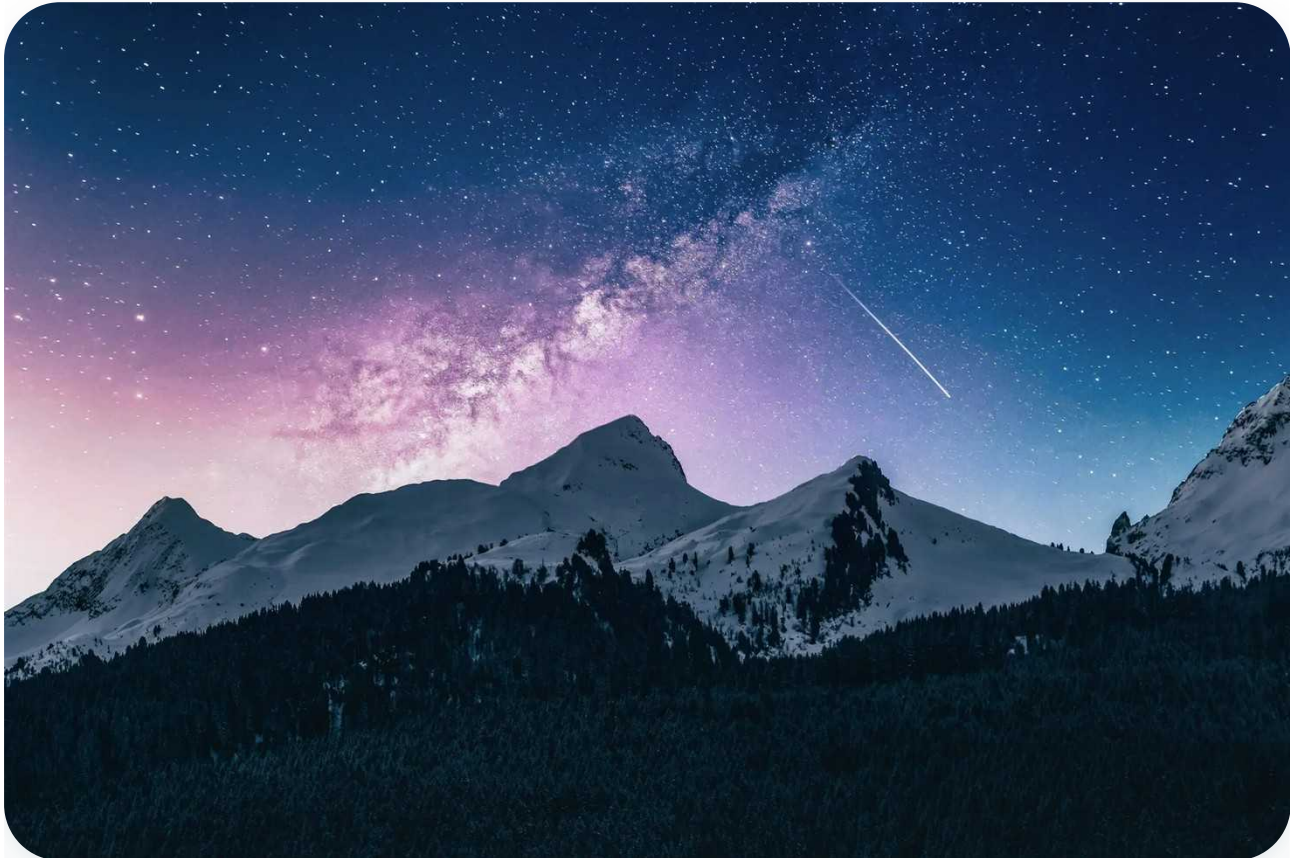


THE ADULT ADHD ASSESSMENT GUIDE

Chapter 2

What is ADHD?

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Before deciding whether to seek an assessment, it helps to know what ADHD in adults really means. ADHD is a recognised neurodevelopmental condition, not a modern label or a question of willpower. This chapter explains it in plain terms, sets out the three presentations, and clears away a few myths that get in the way of understanding.

ADHD in plain terms

ADHD stands for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The name is a little misleading, because it is less about a shortage of attention and more about how attention is regulated. People with ADHD can focus intensely on things that interest them, yet struggle to start or stay with things that do not.

It is a neurodevelopmental condition, which means it is part of how the brain has developed from early life. Evidence of traits from childhood is needed for a diagnosis, even when those traits were quiet or went unnoticed at the time. ADHD does not appear from nowhere in adulthood, though it is very often recognised for the first time then.

The three presentations

ADHD is usually described in three ways, depending on which traits stand out most. Many adults move between them over a lifetime, and the picture can change with stress, sleep and the demands of the day.

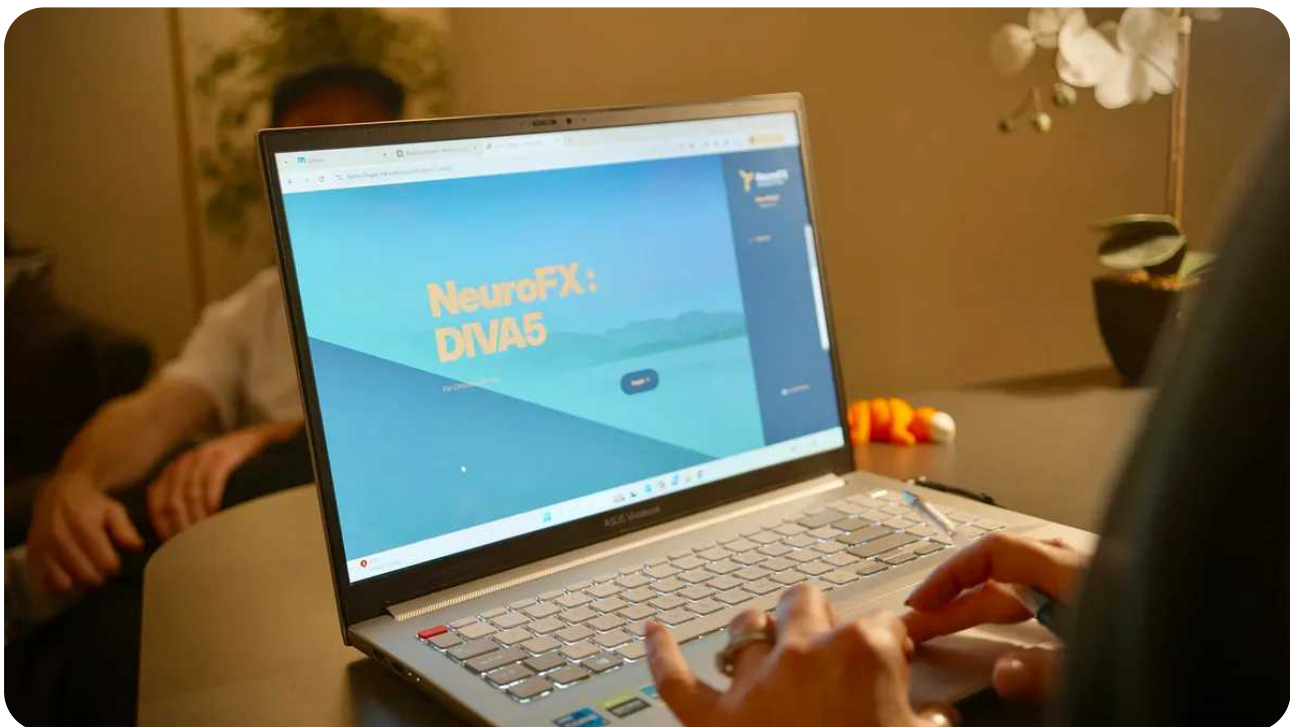
	Mainly inattentive	Mainly hyperactive and impulsive	Combined
In a sentence	Attention drifts, details slip, focus is hard to steer.	Restlessness, acting first, finding it hard to wait.	A mix of both, in varying measure.
Day to day	Losing things, missing deadlines, reading the same line twice.	Talking over people, fidgeting, a constant inner engine.	Some days look inattentive, others restless.
Why it gets missed	Quiet and internal, so it rarely disrupts a classroom.	Mistaken for being disruptive or simply energetic.	Traits are read as a personality, not a pattern.

The same condition can present in three different ways.

Myths worth letting go of

A few ideas about ADHD are simply wrong, and they keep people from seeking help:

- **It is just poor discipline.** ADHD is about how the brain regulates attention and impulse, not about character or effort.
- **You cannot have it if you did well at school.** Many people coped by working far harder than their peers, or were only stretched later in life.
- **It is a childhood thing you grow out of.** Traits change with age, but for many people they continue into adult life.
- **Everyone is a bit ADHD these days.** Most people are distractible sometimes. ADHD is a persistent pattern that affects several areas of life.



Structured, validated tools sit at the heart of a thorough assessment.

It is not about effort or intelligence

ADHD says nothing about how clever, capable or hard-working you are. Many adults with ADHD are exactly those things, which is part of why they were overlooked for so long. They learned to mask, to compensate, and to carry a quiet extra load that other people never saw.

ADHD also rarely travels alone. Anxiety, low mood and sleep difficulties often sit alongside it. A good assessment always considers other explanations for your difficulties, so that the answer you receive is the right one rather than the first one. You can read more about [how ADHD shows up in adult life](#) in the next chapter.

Where the understanding comes from

Our guidance follows [NICE guideline NG87](#), the national standard for recognising and managing ADHD. That matters, because it means an assessment is not one clinician's opinion. It is a structured process measured against an agreed national framework.

Key takeaways

- ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition about how attention and impulse are regulated, not about willpower.
- It is described in three presentations: mainly inattentive, mainly hyperactive and impulsive, and combined.
- Evidence of traits from childhood is needed for a diagnosis, even if they went unnoticed at the time.
- ADHD says nothing about intelligence or effort, and a good assessment always considers other explanations too.

Common questions

Can ADHD really start in adulthood?

No. ADHD is present from early life, even when it was missed. What often starts in adulthood is the recognition of it, frequently when life's demands outgrow the ways someone has learned to cope.

What are the three presentations of ADHD?

Mainly inattentive, mainly hyperactive and impulsive, and combined. They describe which traits stand out most, and many adults shift between them over time.

If I did well at school, can I still have ADHD?

Yes. Many people coped by working much harder than those around them, or were only stretched later in life. Doing well does not rule ADHD out.

Does ADHD come with other conditions?

Often. Anxiety, low mood and sleep difficulties commonly sit alongside it. A thorough assessment considers these so the conclusion you reach is accurate.

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This guide is general information, not a substitute for individual clinical advice, and it cannot diagnose ADHD or any other condition. If you are concerned about yourself or your child, please speak to your GP or arrange a professional assessment. NeuroFX is a CQC-registered clinic and our guidance follows NICE guideline NG87.