

# All about ADHD

Here's how you can help your child and family cope with this condition

**A**ttention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) affects up to five per cent of Australian primary school children, with reports suggesting the condition is more common in boys than girls.

For parents whose kids are diagnosed with ADHD, it can be a challenging time, because settling on a treatment option and coping with symptoms may not only be difficult but, at times, confusing. This is due to the large amount of conflicting information available, as well as the debates on the efficacy of medications, which can cloud decisions.

One thing is clear when dealing with youngsters who have ADHD: a parent's active involvement in their child's wellbeing can help not only the child with ADHD, but also the whole family, to better manage and cope with the condition.

## What is ADHD?

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurological condition that refers to a cluster of behaviours such as poor concentration, hyperactivity, impulsivity and heightened frustration. As well, 80 per cent of people with ADHD also have a specific learning disability which may affect their ability to read and their short-term memory, and result in poor organisational and motor skills. Children and young people with the condition (which occurs in one in 20) say they often feel lonely or anxious and out of control. ADHD isn't related to intelligence; in fact, many very intelligent people have had the condition – people such as Einstein.

## A light bulb moment

Author and mum Kerry Cooney has learnt how to manage ADHD symptoms and is teaching others. As a young mum working in welfare, she spent many years associated

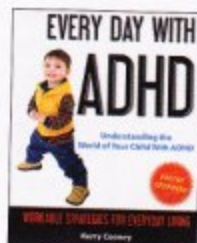
with families in need of assistance. At one stage, she began to realise her own son was behaving in a similar way as a child with whom she was working.

When her child was eventually diagnosed with ADHD, it was as if a light had been turned on for Kerry. For the first time she had a foundation upon which to build behavioural strategies to better cope with the difficult issues surrounding ADHD.

'My goal is to make a difference in peoples' lives, and many children and families have unmet needs,' she says. So, to satisfy the demands of meeting client needs and caring for her son Daniel, who's now 24 years old, Kerry started researching the topic and founded a group for parents who were trying desperately to come to grips with ADHD.

'My passion is to help people

Giving your child structure in their day and encouraging them to focus on their strengths helps make them happier all round.



### TAKE IT ONE DAY AT A TIME

Current treatments focus on reducing the symptoms of ADHD and improving functioning. They include medication, various types of psychotherapy, education or training, or a combination of treatments. Here are Kerry's top tips for coping with day-to-day living:

**1** Being aware of ADHD isn't enough; you must gain real understanding so that its effects are clear and almost predictable.

**2** Uncover the strengths and skills of the person with ADHD and encourage them. This builds confidence and creates a more positive environment.



**3** Learn to prioritise and to focus on what really matters. For example, with all of our technology today, does it really matter that Johnny has poor handwriting? Alternatively, listening for the 10th time as he talks about his passion creates better relationships and helps improve his self-esteem.

**4** Learn to plan and provide structure to cope with some of the traits of ADHD, because hyperactivity, weak short-term memory and poor organisation aren't going to magically disappear.

**5** Implement strategies for all issues and difficult times during each day - one at a time. This will help to alleviate stress.

meet the real needs of their children; not just to know what the condition is, but to fully understand it. Most of the information around was in medical language and did not offer parents any practical help.'

Kerry conducts parenting workshops and courses (visit [www.everydaywithadhd.com.au](http://www.everydaywithadhd.com.au)), and the success of the strategies put forward in those workshops have become the foundation for her book, *Every Day With ADHD* (Fishtail Solutions, \$32.95).

### Identifying strengths

Kerry knows management is never simple; she agrees medication has its place, but says the other part of the equation - practical strategies - is just as important and has been overlooked.

'If there's no specific information around about strategies, then parents and teachers have nothing on which to base their decisions.'

'Once you have accepted the diagnosis, it's important to work with your child and their school to identify your child's strengths and encourage everyone concerned to make use of those strengths,' Kerry explains.

'It requires more than just knowing the

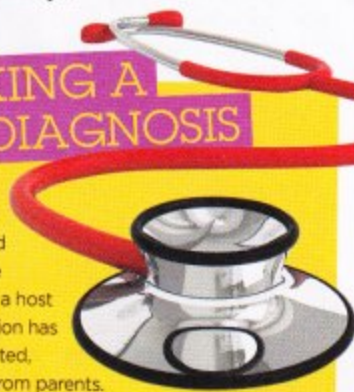
basics; it is also understanding how these children feel and recognising that having the condition impacts every moment of their waking day, including their social life,' Kerry says.

Most importantly, it is individual care, organisation skills, love and encouragement that help a child with ADHD feel happier and succeed at school, home and when building close relationships.

### MAKING A DIAGNOSIS

This is a complex process and can only be made after a host of information has been collected, especially from parents.

There is no single test and a paediatrician, child psychologist or child psychiatrist can make the assessment or arrange a referral.



## Understanding the ADHD brain

Dr Michael Kohn, paediatric specialist at the Children's Hospital at Westmead in Sydney, says every person's experience with ADHD is different and, as such, needs to be treated that way.

### DOES IT RUN IN YOUR GENES?

'The importance of understanding the biology of ADHD cannot be overestimated,' Dr Kohn says.

'There is such a strong factor in inheriting this condition and it can so easily be seen running through families. We can now base our treatment plan not just from a history of what's been happening in their environment but also on results from electro-encephalograms (a graphic record

of brainwaves representing electrical activity in the brain, used especially in the diagnosis of neurological disorders) and special scans.'

### THE RIGHT TIME FOR TREATMENT

Dr Kohn says the crucial period for special care is at times of transition, such as when young people develop a new relationship or learn to drive a car.

'As time passes, the changes in the brain (neuroplasticity) mean those with ADHD can catch up with their peers,' he adds.

With time, these complicated periods of learning, where stacks of information needs to be assessed, become less and less of a challenge.

## ASK THE EXPERT

DR JOHN ANSWERS YOUR HEALTH QUESTIONS



**Q** I'm 82 years old and would like some advice on what I might try for 'damaged nerves' in my legs. I am in constant pain, especially at night.

JOAN, VIA EMAIL.

**A** It's interesting that you get pain at night. If you suffered when you walked and it was worse the longer you walked, I'd suggest it was due to blocked arteries in the leg, and it would be an idea to have your heart and blood vessels assessed. However, because the pain is at night and is constant, it may be advisable to have your spine checked for osteoarthritis and osteoporosis.

Osteoarthritis may result in the discs or shock absorbers in the back collapsing; osteoporosis is when bones become brittle and can easily break, causing pain. Check if the bony spine is pressing on the nerve roots, which go to make up the sciatic nerve. This pain would be at the back of the legs and travel down to your feet. You'll need a DEXA scan to see how strong your bones are and an X-ray to exclude arthritis and spinal fractures.

Ensure you have enough haemoglobin by having a full blood count, make sure your B group vitamins are up to speed and check your calcium and vitamin D levels.

Hopefully by getting to the root of the cause, you won't be so troubled by the pain.

### ASK DR JOHN FOR ADVICE

Write to *What's Up Doc?*, New Idea, Private Bag 9960, North Sydney, NSW 2059, or email [newidea@pacificmags.com.au](mailto:newidea@pacificmags.com.au). This advice is general, without the benefit of a consultation. Always consult a doctor or healthcare professional. Listen to Dr John's Health Matters on Sundays from 7am to 8am - visit [www.drjohnandarcy.com](http://www.drjohnandarcy.com) to find your local station.