

# Adult ADHD: Tips for an accurate diagnosis

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**W**ith the diagnosis of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) on the rise<sup>1</sup> and a surge in prescriptions to treat the disorder leading to stimulant shortages,<sup>2</sup> ensuring that patients are appropriately evaluated for ADHD is more critical than ever. ADHD is a clinical diagnosis that can be established by clinical interview, although the results of neuropsychological testing and collateral information from family members are helpful. Assessing adults for ADHD can be challenging when they appear to want to convince the clinician that they have the disorder. In this article, I provide tips to help you accurately diagnose ADHD in adult patients.

## Use an ADHD symptom scale

An ADHD symptom checklist, such as the Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale, is an effective tool to establish the presence of ADHD symptoms. A patient can complete this self-assessment tool before their visit, and you can use the results as a springboard to ask them about ADHD symptoms. It is important to elicit specific examples of the ADHD symptoms the patient reports, and to understand how these symptoms affect their functioning and quality of life.

## Review the prescription drug monitoring program

Review your state's prescription drug monitoring program to explore the patient's prior and current prescriptions of stimulants and other controlled substances. Discern if, when, and by whom a patient was previously treated for ADHD, and rule out the rare possibil-

ity that the patient has obtained multiple prescriptions for controlled substances from multiple clinicians, which suggests the patient may have a substance use disorder.

## Begin the assessment at your initial contact with the patient

How patients present on an initial screening call or how they compose emails can reveal clues about their level of organization and overall executive functioning. The way patients complete intake forms (eg, using a concise vs a meandering writing style) as well as their punctuality when presenting to appointments can also be telling.

## Conduct a mental status examination

Patients can have difficulty focusing and completing tasks for reasons other than having ADHD. A mental status examination can sometimes provide objective clues that an individual has ADHD. A digressive thought process, visible physical restlessness, and instances of a patient interrupting the evaluator are suggestive of ADHD, although all these symptoms can be present in other conditions (eg, mania). However, signs of ADHD in the mental status examination do not confirm an ADHD diagnosis, nor does their absence rule it out.

## Maintain an appropriate diagnostic threshold

Per DSM-5, an ADHD diagnosis requires that the symptoms cause a significant impairment in functioning.<sup>3</sup> It is up to the clinician to determine if this threshold is met. It is imperative to thoughtfully con-

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sider this because stimulants are first-line treatment for ADHD and are commonly misused. Psychiatrists are usually motivated to please their patients in order to maintain them as patients and develop a positive therapeutic relationship, which improves outcomes.<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to demonstrate integrity, provide an accurate diagnosis, and not be unduly swayed by a patient's wish to receive an ADHD diagnosis. If you sense that a prospective patient is hoping they will receive an ADHD diagnosis and be prescribed a stimulant, it may be prudent to emphasize that the patient will be assessed for multiple mental health conditions, including ADHD, and that treatment will depend on the outcome of the evaluation.

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