Women and Girls with AD/HD

A chat with Patricia O. Quinn, MD

WHILE WE KNOW THAT IT IS AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY DISORDER, we still need greater awareness and understanding of the ways AD/HD can impact the lives of girls and women.

Patricia O. Quinn, MD, coauthored the groundbreaking 1999 book, *Understanding Girls with AD/HD,* with Kathleen Nadeau, PhD, and Ellen Littman, PhD. In 2002, Dr. Quinn coedited *Understanding Women with AD/HD* and the only text for clinicians, *Gender Issues and AD/HD: Research, Diagnosis, and Treatment.* A graduate of Georgetown University Medical School, Dr. Quinn specializes in child development and psychopharmacology and has worked for over thirty years in the areas of AD/HD and learning disabilities. CHADD recognized her efforts with a Hall of Fame Award in 2000.

Among Dr. Quinn's other books are the recently released *Attention, Girls! A Guide to Learn About Your AD/HD* for girls age eight to thirteen years and the revised *Putting on the Brakes: Understanding and Taking Control of Your ADD or ADHD.* She also edited *ADD and the College Student: A Guide for High School and College Students with ADD* and was coeditor of *ADDvance: A Magazine for Women with ADD.*

In addition to giving workshops nationwide, Dr. Quinn has discussed the subject of girls and women with AD/HD on Lifetime TV's *New Attitudes,* ABC TV's *Good Morning America,* and the PBS show *To the Contrary.* She lives in Washington, DC, with her husband and four children, three of whom have AD/HD. Earlier this year, Dr. Quinn answered questions during an online Ask the Expert chat sponsored by CHADD and the National Resource Center on AD/HD.

My daughter has AD/HD, but she's not the hyperactive type. She loses focus easily and I have to repeat myself constantly to keep her on task. Is medication the best option for her? I thought medication was only to help kids who are out of control and hyperactive.

Great question and one that is commonly asked. First, I would like to state that all three types of AD/HD (Inattentive, Combined, and Hyperactive/Impulsive Types) respond to stimulant medications. Girls commonly have the Inattentive Type. Recent studies show that this type is not milder in any way and, in fact, seems to lead to more problems for these girls as adolescents.

Regarding taking medication for AD/HD—first, you need to decide with your daughter's treating physician if this is the best course for her. If she is suffering impairment as a result of her symptoms, a total treatment program should be considered. This includes medication as well as other treatments.

You should also remember that AD/HD is not just an academic disorder, and the problems you are seeing with attention most likely are affecting her socially and in other areas.

Our eight-year-old daughter is both hyperactive and inattentive. We hate to medicate, but is there anything else we can try—eliminating certain foods, etc., to help our child? She's in third grade and doing much better since we started the medication, but there is a lot of concern over medicine.

Almost every parent who has ever had to medicate his or her child feels the way that you do. It is not easy. However, you have done what is best for your daughter. There are other things that you can do in addition to medication, however.

First, make sure that she gets enough sleep and eats a nutritious diet. If she has food allergies, you should eliminate those from her diet. But, no studies have shown that these cause AD/HD. Some studies have shown that sodium benzoate and food colorings can make children (any child) more hyperactive, so I would also avoid foods containing these as well.

You also want to make sure that your parenting skills and behavioral programs in place at home are working to reward appropriate behaviors. So often, we tend to spend a great deal of our time telling our children what they shouldn't be doing and assume that they will know what to do instead.

Parenting is difficult under the best of circumstances, parenting a child with AD/HD requires patience, a sense of humor, and a great deal of empathy and hard work. Keep up your concern and love for your daughter and give her as much support as you can.

Do you have any research that shows that AD/HD symptoms increase with puberty in girls? And do you see often that an increase in medication dosage is necessary?

Research does show that symptoms increase in puberty for girls (and tend to decrease for boys). Hyperactive symptoms tend to decrease for both after puberty. An increase in medication is often warranted at that time or, if she has not been treated before, she may need to start medication.

I have also found that this is when many of the girls manifest depression or poor self-esteem, although it begins much earlier. When I talk with women with AD/HD they say that their self-esteem issues began as young as age eight in most instances. The hormonal connection "rears its ugly head" at this time and worsening symptoms are often related to menstrual periods.

My teenage daughter has AD/HD and is struggling with self-esteem issues. She has only a few friends, constantly

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feels that she is being criticized, and says she doesn't feel like she fits in anywhere. My husband thinks we should just put her on medication. Will medication help with this issue or this just normal adolescent behavior?

Medication has been shown in studies to improve social relationships and behaviors in adolescents. However, I would caution that if you are just now considering treatment, a lot of other things will need to be done. Definitely working on her self-esteem is important. Find something she is good at and encourage her to try new things.

She may also need to work on social skills. If she is shy and withdrawn, she may need to be encouraged to try making friends again. Medication should improve her ability to interact with others to either slow down and listen and not interrupt or to wait her turn in conversations. Self-esteem issues and possible chronic low-level depression or demoralization may also need to be worked on in professional therapy as well.

My 15-year-old daughter has AD/HD and has started using marijuana. I am not sure what to do. I do not think this is good for her, but she says it controls the symptoms and helps her focus. What should I do? I did not want her to take other medications because I was afraid this would happen, but now it has happened anyway! I don't want her going to jail!

Guess what—your daughter is right! Marijuana does decrease symptoms by increasing the ability to focus. In that sense, she is "treating" her AD/HD. However, it also causes a significant depletion of dopamine... not to mention it is illegal!

Many teens and young adults have discovered what your daughter has. And if their AD/HD goes untreated, they will continue to seek out other treatments. Studies have shown that treating with stimulants—the proper and most effective way to treat her AD/HD—may reduce the risk of substance abuse in adolescents with AD/HD. The myth is that stimulants lead to substance abuse when just the opposite may be the fact.

My husband and I are planning to start our family soon. I am currently taking medications to help control my ADD and my depression. I don't want to take either of these medications while I am pregnant. What are my options to help control the ADD and depression during pregnancy?

I wish you all the best as you start your family. Your decision is a wise one. Stimulant medications are not recommended for use during pregnancy unless the risk to the mother outweighs the risk to the developing fetus. Antidepressants are another story, however. You really need to think about and discuss this carefully.

Studies have shown that depression during pregnancy can cause serious problems both to the mother and developmentally for their offspring. If your depression is the result of having untreated AD/HD and not a primary coexisting condition, you may be able to stop the antidepressant as well. I would ask your doctor about this.

What to do instead? Well, many women report that the higher estrogen levels during pregnancy cause their symptoms to decrease significantly. In addition, I would suggest that you take as much time for yourself and simplify your life as much as possible.

Get plenty of exercise and try yoga and meditation. Both yoga and meditation have been shown to reduce symptoms in recent studies. I would also get a coach or someone else to help keep you on track as much as possible. And try to enjoy the pregnancy and get plenty of rest...you will need it!

I am 52. I wonder if I have ADD or if I have aging issues. I have always put off trying to understand something auditory until I can read it. Now, I find it really hard to focus on one thing. My mind is always wandering. I am missing details in writing. I don't recognize people's faces or I forget their names. What should I do—get evaluated? Can women my age try to start medication?

AD/HD is not an adult-onset disorder. What you might see is that AD/HD symptoms worsen as you go into menopause and estrogen decreases, but there are also significant cognitive problems associated with menopause alone.

If you have always had symptoms and they just seem to be getting worse, I would suggest you seek out a screening for possible AD/HD. Medications commonly used to treat AD/HD are just as effective in adults as in children.

Some women with AD/HD whose symptoms have been well controlled may need to increase the dose of their stimulants as they enter menopause just like the adolescent girls. In any case, I would suggest you seek out help for your symptoms as they are definitely affecting your functioning.

I am in my sixties and I was finally diagnosed about seven years ago with ADD and learning disabilities. I am on medication, I am working with a life coach, and I have read countless books. I still feel frustrated, with no end in sight of getting control on a daily basis. Is there more information for women with ADD and learning disabilities?

You are fortunate to have found out what the problem is; many women spend their entire lives frustrated and not knowing. Your LD and AD/HD obviously cannot be cured, but you can live better with them, mainly by choosing a lifestyle that is ADD-friendly.

Sometimes that involves difficult decisions, like moving to a smaller house or apartment or changing jobs, etc. But by simplifying and making accommodations on a daily basis, you can be successful and enjoy every day. I don't know of any book that addresses AD/HD and LD specifically, but our *Understanding Women with AD/HD* and Sari Solden's book, *Women with Attention Deficit Disorder*, are places to start.

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