

5 risks of Undiagnosed ADHD¹

It is estimated that 3- 4% of adults in the UK have ADHD. However, less than 20% of those people have a diagnosis.



1. Risks associated with mental health

People who have mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, may not respond well to treatment for these conditions, unless their underlying ADHD is correctly diagnosed and effectively treated. (Newcorn et al., 2007)².

It is essential that the professional assessing for ADHD conducts a detailed exploration of the person's development and psychiatric history, to identify whether the anxiety and low mood are distinct from their ADHD symptoms or are a consequence of ADHD. Many people with ADHD suffer from anxiety and depression because ADHD symptoms make it very difficult to manage the tasks of daily living and life often feels overwhelming and people have a sense that they are failing. This naturally leads to anxiety and depression but it is evident that the driver here is the ADHD and the anxiety and depression are secondary and are consequences of the ADHD symptoms. Therefore, if the ADHD is correctly diagnosed and managed, the individual would expect their anxiety and low mood to improve without specifically treating these conditions separately.

¹ Risks Associated With Undiagnosed ADHD and/or Autism: A Mixed-Method Systematic Review *J Atten Disord* 2023 Oct;27(12):1393-1410 doi: 10.1177/10870547231176862. Epub 2023 Jun 21. Blandine French <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/37341291/>

² The complexity of ADHD diagnosis and treatment of the adult patient comorbidities. J.H.Newcorn et al, 2007. *CNS Spectrums* 12 (S12), 1-16.

2. Risks linked with Academic Performance

In college and university, adults with ADHD often struggle to concentrate and are easily distracted. They will frequently procrastinate and avoid tasks which require sustained attention. They will often not begin work on assignments



until they feel the pressure of an upcoming deadline. They may find it hard to plan and organise their studies and may struggle with time management with the result they are not productive. All these factors mean that someone with ADHD is at risk of not reaching their potential academically, with all the implications this has for academic and professional success and fulfilment. In addition, this way of studying is extremely

stressful and tends to have strongly negative implications in terms of a student's mental health. Having an ADHD Assess in early adult life helps people get ADHD-specific help as soon as possible so it minimises impact on college and university studies.

3. Risk of impairment to social, family and work relationships

In social, family and work settings, individuals with ADHD report interpersonal difficulties because of problems with listening and processing what someone else is saying, forgetfulness, a tendency to interrupt others and sometimes to intrude on others impulsively. People with ADHD often have a highly active mind with thoughts, images and songs pinging off in all directions. This intense mental activity can make it hard for an individual to be fully present in the moment with those they are close to such as their partner, their children and their friends.

This can lead to an erosion of relationship and frustration, guilt and sadness in the individual themselves who fears they are failing those they love. People with ADHD often comment that they say



things impulsively without thinking and so inadvertently offend others. People with ADHD are often very physically restless and fidgety and this may convey to someone who is talking, that what they are saying is unimportant or uninteresting. Being physically restless and fidgety in a work context, such as during a presentation, team meeting or video call, may be perceived as unprofessional. All of these ADHD symptoms, if undiagnosed and untreated, may have a negative impact on a person's interpersonal relationships.

4. Risk of Substance Misuse

Just as there is a strong genetic component in ADHD, there is also a strong genetic component in Alcohol Use Disorder and the research suggests that



there may be a significant genetic overlap between the 2 conditions. Research conducted in 2021 by Luderer and colleagues, suggested that impulsive decision making and impairment to the brain's reward pathway, makes people with ADHD vulnerable to misusing alcohol and up to 43% develop an Alcohol Use Disorder.³

5. Low self-esteem

Many adults with undiagnosed ADHD are very self-critical and typically tell themselves that they are "lazy", "stupid" or "incompetent". Understanding that the reasons for difficulties are due to ADHD and not a lack of effort,



willpower or competence, can fundamentally change a person's sense of themselves and significantly improve self-confidence and self-esteem. This protects people in the future from mental health problems such as anxiety and depression which may be caused by low self-esteem and pervasive struggles with organisation and managing the tasks of day-to-day life.

³ Alcohol use disorders and ADHD, M.Luderer et al. *Neurosci Biobehav Rev* 128, 2021, 648-660.