

SHAPE

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Why Doctors Are Diagnosing More Women with ADHD

The use of ADHD medications has skyrocketed among women over the past decade. Experts share some theories why, plus what to do if you have symptoms of ADHD.



It's time to pay closer attention to the number of women prescribed ADHD medications, according to a new report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The CDC looked at how many privately insured women between the ages of 15 and 44 filled prescriptions for medications like Adderall and Ritalin between 2003 and 2015. They found that four times as many reproductive-age women were using prescribed ADHD medications in 2015 than in 2003.

When the researchers broke the data down by age group, they found a 700 percent increase in the use of ADHD drugs in 25- to 29-year-old women, and a 560 percent increase in 30- to 34-year-old women.

Why the spike?

The spike in prescriptions is likely due, at least in part, to a spike in awareness of ADHD in women. "Until recently, the majority of research on ADHD has been done on white, hyperactive, school-age boys," says Michelle Frank, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist specializing in women with ADHD and vice president of the [Attention Deficit Disorder Association](#). "It's only in the last 20 years that we've begun to consider how ADHD affects women over the life span."

Another issue: Awareness and research often focus on hyperactivity, which—despite the slightly misleading acronym—isn't necessarily a symptom of ADHD. In fact, women are less likely to be hyperactive, so they've historically gone undiagnosed at higher rates, Frank says. "If you're a girl and you're not struggling too much in school, it's really easy to fly under the radar," she says. "But we're seeing an increase in awareness, diagnosis, and treatment." In other words, it's not necessarily that doctors are getting increasingly liberal with their prescription pads, but that more women are getting diagnosed and properly treated for ADHD. (Another gender gap: [More women have PTSD than men, but fewer are diagnosed.](#))

Is it cause for concern?

While increased awareness and treatment of ADHD is a positive thing, there is a more cynical take on the data. Namely, there might be an increase in women going to their doctor with phony ADHD symptoms as a way to score pills, says Indra Cidambi, M.D., an addiction specialist and founder of the [Center for Network Therapy](#).

"It is important to find out who is prescribing these medications," she says. "If a majority of these increased prescriptions are coming from primary care doctors with little expertise to diagnose and treat ADHD, it may be cause for concern."

That's because ADHD medications like Adderall can be addictive. (It's one of the [seven most addictive legal substances](#).) "Stimulant ADHD medication increases brain dopamine," Dr. Cidambi explains. When these pills are abused, they can get you high.

Finally, the CDC report also points out that very little research has been done on how drugs like Adderall and Ritalin affect women who are pregnant or are thinking about getting pregnant. "Given that half of U.S. pregnancies are unintended, ADHD medication use among reproductive-age women might result in early pregnancy exposure, a critical period for fetal development," the report states. More research is needed on the safety of ADHD

medications—especially before and during pregnancy—to help women make smart decisions about treatment.

What should you do if you have signs and symptoms of ADHD?

ADHD remains highly misunderstood, says Frank. "A lot of times women and girls initially seek treatment for depression and anxiety," she explains. "But then they treat the depression and anxiety and there's still a missing piece—that missing piece is a really important one."

Symptoms of ADHD can include hyperactivity, but also things like constantly feeling overwhelmed, being what some might call messy or lazy, or having trouble with focus or time management. "A lot of women also experience emotional sensitivity," says Frank. "Women with [undiagnosed] ADHD are often incredibly overwhelmed and chronically stressed." (Related: [The New Activity Tracker That Puts Stress Before Steps](#))

If you feel like you might have ADHD, look for a psychologist or psychiatrist who specifically has experience in treating women with ADHD, advises Frank. Before you go, make a list of some of the executive functioning tasks that are a struggle for you—for example, inability to stay on task at work or consistently running late because you can't seem to manage your time no matter how hard you try.

The best treatment for ADHD will probably involve a prescription but should also include behavioral therapy, says Frank. "Medication is only one piece of the puzzle," she says. "Remember it's not a magic pill, it's one tool in the toolbox."