College Students with ADHD

Many students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) attend college. College students with ADHD face a number of challenges, including choosing a supportive school and community where they can:

- find and access medical services
- get help with organizing their schedule and life
- succeed academically

Most people with ADHD are diagnosed before college. However, some people may not recognize the signs and symptoms of ADHD until they are at college. Trying to balance school work and the freedom of living away from home for the first time may be challenging. It can be natural to feel unfocused, distracted, overwhelmed, or disorganized when attending college. However, if these issues have caused significant problems in the past and are getting in the way of current functioning, the student may have ADHD.

If a student is struggling, it may be helpful to seek consultation with a qualified mental health professional. The diagnosis of ADHD is made based on a comprehensive clinical assessment. This may include information from multiple sources, including rating scales, getting history from the student, family, or past teachers if possible. There is no single test (brain imaging, blood testing, or psychological testing) that can reliably diagnose ADHD. Research shows that medication is the most effective treatment for ADHD. Cognitive-behavioral therapy, social skills training, and academic support can also be helpful.

There are many ways to successfully manage ADHD before and during college.

Preparing for and Staying Organized While at College

- Consider the best college environment to meet your needs, such as class size, workload, academic calendar, and availability of support services. Resources to help you find the best college include: high school counselors, parents, friends who are in or have attended college, and national ADHD organizations or websites.

- Learn about the medical services available at colleges before choosing where to go. Some college and university health centers do not prescribe ADHD medications. You may need to find a doctor in the surrounding community. Think about the transportation options and ease of access to that provider.
Talk with your doctor about how to best manage your medications when at college. Do not make changes in your medication without consulting your doctor. Ask your current doctor and the doctor at college to coordinate care. It is also helpful to have a history of your medications and your response to those medications for your new doctor.

If you have used tutors or support before college, think about continuing at college, at least for a little while.

If you need specific support or accommodations, register at the college disability office. If you have a summary of treatment or any psychological tests that were done within the last 3 years, bring them to the visit.

Practice using planners, calendars, or scheduling apps while still in high school. The demands on time management and organization increase greatly in college. Even if your parents helped you in the past, it is important to learn to do it yourself.

Managing Medications at College

Many medications prescribed for ADHD have to be monitored regularly. While at college, you need to schedule and keep your own medical appointments. Changes to your medication should only be made after talking with your doctor.

Learn how to use pharmacy services. Pay attention to prescription start dates and expiration dates. Many medications prescribed for ADHD are “controlled substances” so states may have additional rules on how these medicines can be provided, including limits on how often prescriptions can be refilled.

Taking medication that is not prescribed for you, sometimes called “diversion” or “academic doping,” is illegal and unsafe. Your medications were prescribed by your doctor who knows you and your medical history. They should only be taken by you. There are serious cardiac, neurological, and psychological risks of misusing ADHD medications. There can also be serious risks to mixing medications with alcohol or other drugs.

Keep medications safely stored or hidden to protect against theft. If medications are stolen, report it to campus or local police.

Adjusting to the academic, social, and organizational demands of college is difficult for most students. It can be especially difficult for students with ADHD. Arranging for support from medical and school professionals can help students with ADHD have a successful college experience, as well as a long career after graduation.
For additional information, see the ADHD Medication Guide and Facts for Families:

#4 The Depressed Child
#6 Children Who Can’t Pay Attention/ADHD
#16 Children with Learning Disabilities
#22 Normality
#41 Substance Abuse Treatments for Children and Adolescents: Questions to Ask
#47 The Anxious Child
#57, #58 Normal Adolescent Development
#66 Helping Teenagers with Stress

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