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## Can Adults Get a Different Kind of ADHD?

New studies raise questions about whether attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder in adults is distinct from the condition diagnosed in children



By **SUMATHI REDDY**

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Could adults diagnosed for the first time with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder have a condition distinct from what's diagnosed in children?

That's the provocative question posed by two large studies published in May in *JAMA Psychiatry*. It's a possible explanation for why a sizable number of people not diagnosed with ADHD as children met the criteria for it as young adults.

Traditionally, researchers have believed that ADHD is a brain disorder that originates in childhood and is often outgrown, though some symptoms persist. An estimated 11% of U.S. children have been diagnosed with ADHD, while it affects about 4% to 5% of U.S. adults. ADHD is characterized by a pattern of inattention, impulsivity or hyperactivity that interferes with daily functioning and is treated with medication, behavioral therapy or both.

To diagnose adults for ADHD, one criterion is that they showed some ADHD symptoms that started before age 12, according to the most recent version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

The studies followed cohorts of children—one in the United Kingdom and the other in Brazil—and assessed health markers at different intervals.

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United Kingdom study, researchers are following more than 2,000 twins in England and Wales, evaluating ADHD at ages 5, 7, 10 and 12, and most recently 18. About 80% of the study's participants with ADHD as children no longer had it by age 18.

But the researchers found that among the 166 people who had ADHD at age 18, 67.5% of them didn't have it as children.

"We were a bit surprised," says Jessica Agnew-Blais, a postdoctoral researcher at King's College London and first author of the study. "In general, adult ADHD is considered a continuation of childhood ADHD."

Further research is needed to determine the cause of late-onset ADHD, she says, but the researchers came up with three possible explanations. One possibility is that these people had ADHD symptoms as children, but the disorder was masked by supportive family and school environments.

Another potential explanation is that members of the late-onset ADHD group actually have other disorders that can have similar symptoms to ADHD, such as depression, anxiety or alcohol and drug dependence. But Dr. Agnew-Blais says even when excluding this group, about 34% of the 112 with late-onset ADHD remained.

The third explanation is the most intriguing. "It could be that the biological underpinnings of the disorders are different," she says.

She says genetic and brain-imaging studies could shed more light on such questions and determine if different treatments are needed.

In a separate study, researchers in Brazil have been following more than 5,000 children in Pelotas, a city near the Uruguayan border. The researchers assessed the children for



Jessica Agnew-Blais, a postdoctoral researcher at King's College London, is first author of a recent JAMA Psychiatry that examined ADHD in adults. *PHOTO: JACK STONEBRIDGE*

ADHD at ages 11 and again at 18 or 19.

By that later age, about 12% of the cohort had ADHD. Among those diagnosed, only 12.2%, or 60 people, also had received a childhood diagnosis of ADHD.

“It was a small overlap,” says Arthur Caye, first author of the study and a research doctorate candidate at Hospital de Clinicas de Porto Alegre.

The researchers believe one possible explanation is that onset age of ADHD for some people may be later than previously believed. The DSM used to include the onset of some ADHD symptoms before the age of 7. But the most recent version of the manual has upped the age to 12.

It may be that the condition can strike at any time. “The question that remains is whether it’s the same biological process that’s going on and occurring at different times of life,” Mr. Caye says. “Or is it two separate syndromes?”

The recent research follows a study published in 2015 in the American Journal of Psychiatry. In that study, researchers found that among a group of more than 1,000 people in New Zealand, there was virtually no overlap between those diagnosed with ADHD as children and those diagnosed at age 38.

Some clinicians expressed skepticism at the idea that ADHD in children and adults could be different.

“People are born with ADHD,” says Peter Jaksa, a clinical psychologist with the ADHD Center in Chicago.

Dr. Jaksa estimates that a bit more than half of his adult patients with ADHD were not diagnosed as children. Many of his patients, he says, excelled in school while at home. But once they get to college and are on their own, they aren’t able to keep up because

they lack the organizational skills needed to succeed.

“Their biology didn’t change. The biology is the same as it was when they were growing up,” he says.

Others, like Matthew Lorber, director of the child and adolescent psychiatry department at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City, says the studies could influence his clinical decisions.

“I’ve been reluctant to consider ADHD as a diagnosis with people if, when talking about their childhood, they haven’t noticed or recalled any symptoms,” he says. He adds that he plans to be more careful assessing ADHD in such patients.

ADHD is thought to be related to the development of the prefrontal cortex, a region of the brain involved in executive functions like decision-making and planning. The prefrontal cortex doesn’t fully mature until people are in their mid 20s.

“There is the possibility that during that process of maturation, the brain can evolve into what might be an ADHD-like brain,” Dr. Lorber says.

An editorial accompanying the JAMA Psychiatry studies calls the research “a ‘call to arms’ to study adult-onset ADHD.”

Joseph Biederman, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School who sees patients at Massachusetts General Hospital, was a co-author of the editorial. He says the biggest flaw in the studies was not fully understanding that the diagnosis of ADHD is not black or white, but more on a continuum.

In his clinic, he says he sees adults all the time who don’t remember having ADHD symptoms as children. In some cases, they may not remember. In others they may just have had milder symptoms as a child that have grown stronger in adult years.

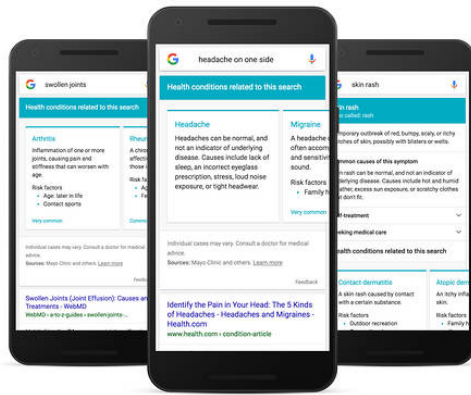
“I don’t have any problem with the idea that some adults do not have clear signs or symptoms of ADHD in childhood,” he says. “But that does not mean they have a different condition. It just emerges a little bit later in life.”

The DMS criterion of age 12, he says, is “totally arbitrary” and not cut and dry.

“It’s not true that you need to have all the symptoms present before the age of 12,” he says. “You have to have at least some. Illnesses evolve over a period of time. Children and adults often present with a partial syndrome, which is rarely treated. So we know very little about what to do with people who have symptoms below the threshold for diagnosis.”

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