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ATTENTION DEFICIT HYPERACTIVITY DISORDER (ADHD) IN ADULTS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATE OF KNOWLEDGE, DIAGNOSTIC CHALLENGES, AND THERAPEUTIC STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder most commonly diagnosed in childhood. In recent years, the approach to its diagnosis and understanding has undergone significant changes. ADHD is increasingly being diagnosed in adulthood, which is related to advances in diagnostics and growing awareness among specialists. The aim of this review is to present the current state of knowledge regarding the clinical picture, diagnostic methods, and therapeutic strategies used in the treatment of ADHD in adults. The most common comorbid disorders and difficulties resulting from late diagnosis of this condition will also be discussed. Attention was also drawn to the need for further research and the development of specialist education in the diagnosis of ADHD.

KEYWORDS

ADHD in Adults, Diagnosis, Treatment, Clinical Picture, Comorbid Disorders

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Introduction.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), as a neurodevelopmental disorder, has a complex and multifactorial etiology, in which genetic and neurobiological factors play a key role. Studies indicate a strong heritability of ADHD, with an estimated heritability of approximately 70-80% [1, 2, 3]. However, this is not the inheritance of a single gene, but results from the interaction of many genes, some of which are involved in the development of the nervous system and the functioning of neurotransmitters. At the neurobiological level, ADHD is primarily associated with dysfunction of the dopaminergic and noradrenergic systems in the brain, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, basal ganglia, and cerebellum [4, 5, 6, 8]. This leads to disturbances in the neural networks responsible for executive functions such as attention, planning, impulse control, and emotion regulation. Reduced activity of these neurotransmitters affects the efficiency of communication between neurons, which manifests itself in the observed clinical symptoms. In addition to genetic predisposition, environmental factors such as prenatal exposure to nicotine and alcohol, low birth weight, and head injuries in early childhood may also contribute to the development of ADHD, although their role is smaller compared to genetics [7,8,9].

Materials and methods

A detailed analysis of 79 peer-reviewed scientific articles, including systematic reviews and meta-analyses, published between 2002 and 2025 in sources such as PubMed, Google Scholar, and similar.

1. Neuroimaging studies

Differences in brain structure and function in patients with ADHD compared to neurotypical individuals are well documented by neuroimaging studies. Many analyses have shown that individuals with ADHD have a smaller total brain volume [10, 11]. These variables occur especially in key cortical and subcortical areas that are essential for executive functions and attention. These include the prefrontal cortex, basal ganglia, and cerebellum. Due to the hypoactivity of these areas, the brains of people with ADHD have difficulty performing tasks that require high concentration [1, 12, 13, 14]. It is believed that this reduced level of neuronal activity within the frontal-striatal-cerebellar network underlies the characteristic symptoms of ADHD, such as inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity [14, 15, 16].

2. Clinical picture of ADHD in adults

The clinical picture of ADHD in adults often differs from the typical symptoms presented in childhood. Although common features such as difficulty concentrating, hyperactivity, and impulsivity remain unchanged, their nature becomes more subtle or complex with age [2, 17, 18]. In adulthood, the dominant symptom is usually a marked difficulty in maintaining attention, easy distraction, forgetfulness, and a feeling of being "lost" in the rush of tasks. Disorganization of daily life, a tendency to be late, stress about daily responsibilities, a tendency to procrastinate, and difficulty achieving long-term goals are often observed [19].

Impulsivity can manifest itself, among other things, through rash decisions (e.g., ill-considered purchases, frequent changes of partners, sudden abandonment of interests), difficulty controlling emotions, interrupting others in conversation, the need for constant attention, and a tendency to dominate in company [20, 21, 22]. The hyperactivity typical of children often disappears, but is replaced by internal tension, anxiety, or difficulty in remaining still [21, 22, 31].

ADHD in adults can lead to low self-esteem, frustration, and mental overload. People with this disorder often have difficulties in interpersonal relationships, maintaining stable employment, and stabilizing their family life [21, 23]. Due to low social and medical awareness, many adults have been treating only the symptoms of comorbid disorders such as depression, anxiety, or burnout for years [24].

ADHD in adults occurs in three main forms, according to the DSM-5-TR classification [12]:

- With a predominance of attention disorders,
- With a predominance of hyperactivity/impulsivity,
- Mixed type
-
- Which of the following seem to occur most frequently: predominance of attention and mixed [12].

In practice, however, the clinical picture is often nonspecific, variable over time, and unstable, which significantly hinders accurate diagnosis [12, 25].

3. Diagnosis of ADHD in adults

Diagnosing ADHD in adults is a significant clinical challenge. This is primarily due to the lack of clear biological markers [26, 27], a nonspecific clinical picture, and the frequent co-occurrence of other mental disorders that may mask or modify symptoms [28, 29]. The diagnosis is based mainly on the assessment of current symptoms and a retrospective analysis of the patient's functioning in childhood [26, 30].

The diagnosis of ADHD in adults (over 17 years of age), according to the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria, requires that at least five symptoms from the groups of inattention, impulsivity, or hyperactivity be present for at least six months. It is also necessary for these symptoms to have appeared in childhood and to significantly interfere with daily functioning [33]. In practice, however, many adult patients have not been previously diagnosed, which is why retrospective assessment of childhood plays a particularly important role. Interviews with family members, analysis of school records, report cards, and the patient's own memories can be helpful in this regard [31, 32].

The diagnosis also assesses the impact of symptoms on functioning in various areas of life - professional, social, and family [34]. Validated screening tools are used to facilitate diagnosis, including:

- ASRS v1.1 (Adult ADHD Self-Report Scale) – a questionnaire for self-assessment of symptoms [35, 36],
- DIVA-5 (Diagnostic Interview for ADHD in Adults) – a structured clinical interview based on DSM-5 criteria [35, 36],
- WURS (Wender Utah Rating Scale) – a scale for retrospective assessment of childhood symptoms [36].

The diagnosis should be made by a psychiatrist, preferably one with experience in working with adult patients with ADHD [37]. A key diagnostic step is to differentiate it from other mental disorders, especially depression, anxiety disorders, personality disorders, and addictions [28, 38]. Incorrect diagnosis and lack of patient education can lead to ineffective treatment, which in turn increases the risk of psychosocial complications such as unemployment, interpersonal problems, and secondary affective disorders [38, 39].

4. Treatment of ADHD in adults

The treatment of ADHD in adults requires an integrated and individualized approach that takes into account both the core symptoms and frequently co-occurring mental disorders [2]. The best therapeutic results are achieved through an optimal combination of pharmacotherapy and non-pharmacological interventions, such as psychotherapy, psychoeducation, and life skills training. The goal of therapy is not only to reduce ADHD symptoms, but also to improve the patient's psychosocial functioning and quality of life [21, 40].

Pharmacotherapy

In the pharmacological treatment of adults with ADHD, psychostimulant drugs are the basic and most commonly used group of preparations [29]. The most commonly used drugs are those that stimulate the central nervous system, primarily methylphenidate and amphetamines, which increase the availability of dopamine and norepinephrine in the brain [2, 41, 42]. As a result, they improve concentration, attention, impulse control, and reduce hyperactivity [12, 41].

Psychostimulants are considered the first-line treatment for adults with ADHD [17, 29]. An alternative for patients with contraindications to their use is a group of non-stimulant drugs, including, for example, atomoxetine, a selective norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor [17, 43]. In some cases, other drugs are also used, such as guanfacine or bupropion, depending on the clinical picture and coexisting disorders [43].

Non-pharmacological therapy

Psychotherapy, particularly cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), is a key element in supporting the treatment of ADHD. CBT focuses on developing practical strategies for coping with symptoms, improving organization, planning, impulse control, and reducing secondary symptoms such as anxiety or low self-esteem [29, 44].

Psychoeducation plays an important role in increasing patient awareness of ADHD mechanisms, ways of functioning with the diagnosis, and developing adaptive skills. It also facilitates communication and cooperation with family and the work environment [44, 45].

Treatment of comorbid disorders

Most adults with ADHD also suffer from other mental disorders, such as depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, or personality disorders [46]. Effective therapy should include simultaneous treatment of ADHD and comorbid problems [17]. Neglecting any aspect may lead to ineffective treatment and deterioration of the patient's overall mental state.

5. Comorbid disorders in adults with ADHD

ADHD in adults rarely occurs as the only mental disorder. In the vast majority of cases, it is accompanied by other mental difficulties, which significantly complicates the diagnostic process and treatment, and negatively affects the patient's quality of life [23, 47, 48].

Mood disorders

Depression is one of the most common comorbid disorders in adults with ADHD. Symptoms such as low mood, decreased energy, and loss of interest are often the result of chronic stress, frustration, and feelings of failure in life resulting from undiagnosed and untreated ADHD [18, 48, 49]. Some patients also experience dysthymia or bipolar disorder, which often leads to diagnostic difficulties [23, 50].

Anxiety disorders

People with ADHD often have co-occurring anxiety disorders, such as generalized anxiety, social phobia, and panic attacks. These types of symptoms often result from chronic mental overload, difficulties in daily functioning, such as organizing the day, planning tasks, meeting deadlines, or maintaining stable interpersonal relationships [51].

Substance use disorders

People with ADHD are at significantly higher risk of developing addictions to alcohol, nicotine, psychoactive substances, as well as impulsive behaviors, including more frequent, casual sexual encounters [52, 53, 54]. Impulsivity, the need for immediate gratification, and the tendency to seek intense stimuli promote risky behaviors and may lead to the use of psychoactive substances as a form of unconscious self-medication [29, 55, 79].

Personality disorders

Some adults with ADHD meet the diagnostic criteria for personality disorders, most commonly borderline personality disorder or avoidant personality disorder [23, 56, 57]. The coexistence of these disorders exacerbates emotional problems and significantly hinders the therapeutic process [32, 58].

6. Social and professional consequences of late diagnosis of ADHD in adults

Late diagnosis of ADHD in adults has a number of psychosocial consequences. Due to the lack of an accurate diagnosis and low self-awareness of the symptoms of the disorder, many patients unsuccessfully try to cope with difficulties in concentration, organization of daily tasks, addictions, and a lack of understanding from those around them. Incorrect or delayed diagnosis, and thus lack of appropriate treatment, results in lower self-esteem and a deterioration in the quality of life in professional, social, and family terms [17, 19, 21, 23].

Consequences in professional life

ADHD significantly affects the professional functioning of adults. Problems with concentration, feeling overwhelmed by responsibilities, and frequently missing deadlines reduce work efficiency, motivation, and relationships with superiors. People with ADHD are often forced to change jobs frequently. New positions often require even greater self-discipline, organization, and emotional control, which in the long run can lead to faster burnout—not only as a result of the symptoms of ADHD itself, but also of coexisting mental disorders [59, 60, 61, 62].

Adults with ADHD are less likely to attain higher education and more likely to work below their qualifications [21]. Years of professional failure often lead to reduced self-esteem and secondary mood disorders such as depression and anxiety disorders [21, 49]. Konsekwencje społeczne

Impulsivity, emotional difficulties, distractibility, and rapid loss of interest significantly affect the quality of interpersonal relationships [63]. People with ADHD often experience tension in family relationships. A lack of understanding of the mechanisms of the disorder and the patient's unusual behavior can lead to conflicts, difficulties in maintaining lasting relationships, and feelings of isolation and loneliness [64, 65].

For many adults, a late diagnosis becomes a turning point. It allows them to understand previously incomprehensible symptoms and behaviors. Unfortunately, in many cases, living with untreated ADHD for many years results in permanently low self-esteem, difficulties in social relationships, and a sense of alienation—even after receiving an accurate diagnosis and beginning treatment [66, 67, 68].

Economic and systemic consequences

From a socioeconomic perspective, undiagnosed ADHD is associated with a greater burden on the healthcare system, more frequent use of sick leave, as well as an increased risk of unemployment and lower income [24]. These consequences may also include educational difficulties and, in some cases, problems with the law resulting from impulsivity and lack of emotional control [45].

7. Diagnostic and therapeutic challenges in working with adult patients with ADHD

Effective diagnosis and treatment of ADHD in adults is associated with numerous difficulties at both the diagnostic and therapeutic levels. Despite rapidly advancing knowledge and numerous studies on this disorder, it continues to be perceived as characteristic of childhood, which translates into delays in its diagnosis in adult patients [29, 69].

Diagnostic difficulties

One of the main challenges in the diagnostic process is the significant variation in ADHD symptoms in adulthood. Symptoms may be modified—instead of classic hyperactivity, internal anxiety, difficulty concentrating, or verbal impulsivity may be observed. In addition, these symptoms are often masked by compensatory mechanisms developed by the patient, which can make them difficult to detect during clinical examination [17]. Another barrier is the high co-occurrence of other mental disorders—depression, anxiety disorders, addictions, or borderline personality disorder—which often obscure the clinical picture of ADHD [23, 70].

Therapeutic difficulties

Effective therapy should also include psychoeducation, cognitive-behavioral therapy, support in planning, organization, and working on emotion regulation [17, 71]. Challenges in treating patients with ADHD include low motivation for treatment, especially in cases where prolonged struggles with symptoms have led to frustration and reduced self-efficacy. In addition, some patients do not accept the diagnosis, perceiving it as stigmatizing or unreliable [20, 72].

The importance of the therapeutic relationship and systemic support

It is essential to maintain good patient-therapist relations in order to ensure continuity and effectiveness of treatment [72]. Years of experiencing misunderstanding and marginalization can result in a lack of trust in the healthcare system and a negative attitude towards therapy. The support of family, friends, and colleagues is also important—the presence of these components can increase the effectiveness of treatment, regardless of its method [19, 73].

8. Discussion and conclusion

ADHD in adults is a much more widespread and complex disorder than previously thought. Although it has been viewed for many years as a problem typical of childhood, there is now growing evidence that symptoms present in childhood may become more pronounced or take a different form in adulthood. However, diagnosing ADHD in this age group is associated with numerous diagnostic difficulties [17, 18, 24]. These difficulties stem from both the diversity of symptoms and the frequent co-occurrence of other mental disorders, which significantly increases the risk of misdiagnosis [12, 74]. An additional problem is the lack of widely available, standardized diagnostic tools and the limited knowledge of specialists about the course of ADHD in adults [75].

Effective treatment of ADHD should be based on an individualized, interdisciplinary, and comprehensive approach that also takes into account comorbid disorders such as depression, anxiety disorders, and addictions [17, 77, 78]. In addition to pharmacotherapy, appropriate psychotherapy (especially cognitive-behavioral therapy), psychoeducation, executive function training, and social support play a key role [72, 76].

The key challenges for the healthcare system are: raising awareness among clinicians, developing and implementing standardized diagnostic tools for adults, improving access to treatment, and combating the stigma associated with this disorder. A more accurate understanding of ADHD in adults will not only enable more accurate diagnosis and more effective treatment, but also a real improvement in patients' quality of life and their functioning in the professional, family, and social spheres.

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