SYMPTOM

Hyperactivity

Hyperactivity means having unusually high movement, restlessness, talking, or difficulty slowing down

WHAT IT FEELS LIKE
Unable to sit still or slow down

WHERE IT IS FELT
Whole body and mind

MOST COMMON CAUSES
Poor sleep, excitement or stress, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

WHEN IT IS URGENT
Sudden hyperactivity with confusion, hallucinations, or unsafe behaviour

USUALLY LASTS
Minutes to months, based on triggers or underlying cause

SEE A DOCTOR IF
It disrupts daily life, sleep, or relationships for several weeks

Overview

Hyperactivity means moving, talking, or acting more than expected for the situation. You may feel restless inside, even if other people do not notice much movement. Hyperactivity is a symptom, not a diagnosis.

Activity levels differ widely. Young children are often energetic, and adults may become restless during stress, excitement, boredom, or sleep loss. Activity becomes more concerning when it is a clear change, is difficult to control, or repeatedly interferes with school, work, sleep, safety, or relationships.

Hyperactivity can occur by itself or alongside impulsivity, distractibility, anxiety, irritability, or rapid speech. It has several possible causes, so one behaviour or difficult day cannot show what is behind it.

What it may feel or look like

You might feel driven to keep moving or find quiet tasks uncomfortable. Sitting through a lesson, meal, meeting, or journey may be difficult.

Possible signs include:

In adults, hyperactivity may be less visible. It can feel like inner restlessness, racing from one task to another, overworking, or difficulty taking breaks.

Children may be active without being unwell. Their behaviour should be considered in relation to their age, development, surroundings, and activity in more than one setting.

- Fidgeting, pacing, climbing, or frequently leaving a seat
- Talking a great deal or interrupting other people
- Starting tasks quickly but struggling to finish them
- Acting before considering the result
- Feeling impatient, tense, or unable to relax
- Needing constant activity or stimulation
- Sleeping less because it feels hard to settle

Common causes

Common or everyday causes

Excitement, emotional stress, a disrupted routine, boredom, and insufficient sleep can temporarily increase movement or impulsive behaviour. Caffeine, energy drinks, nicotine, and other stimulants like methylphenidate or lisdexamfetamine may also cause restlessness.

Some medicines can increase activity, agitation, or difficulty sleeping. Examples include certain decongestants, stimulant medicines, and some medicines that affect mood. Do not stop a prescribed medicine suddenly without advice. A pharmacist or prescriber can review whether timing or side effects could be involved.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, is one possible cause of persistent hyperactivity. ADHD may also involve difficulty managing attention and impulses. It begins in childhood, although it may not be recognised until later. Hyperactivity alone does not mean that you or your child has ADHD.

Less common causes

Anxiety can cause inner restlessness, repeated movement, rapid speech, and poor concentration. Developmental or sensory differences may also affect how someone regulates movement and attention.

An overactive thyroid, called hyperthyroidism, can cause restlessness along with symptoms such as shaking, sweating, heat intolerance, a fast heartbeat, or unexplained weight loss.

Periods of unusually high or irritable mood can occur in mania or hypomania. Other signs may include needing much less sleep, speaking rapidly, racing thoughts, unusual confidence, or risky decisions. These symptoms need medical assessment, particularly when they are new.

Sudden or urgent causes

A sudden major change in activity can sometimes be related to intoxication, withdrawal, a medication reaction, delirium, or another medical problem. Delirium means a rapid change in attention and awareness, often with confusion. This is different from a person's usual pattern of high energy.

When to seek medical care

Book a routine appointment if hyperactivity lasts for several weeks, keeps returning, or affects learning, work, sleep, relationships, or emotional wellbeing. For a child, consider asking teachers or other caregivers what they notice. Behaviour that appears in several settings can help a clinician understand the pattern.

Arrange same-day medical advice when hyperactivity starts suddenly or comes with confusion, hallucinations, severe agitation, almost no sleep, or behaviour that is markedly out of character. Prompt advice is also appropriate after a new medicine, a dose change, or possible substance use.

Call emergency services if you or another person:

Stay nearby if it is safe, reduce noise and stimulation, and avoid arguing with someone who is severely confused or agitated.

- May harm themselves or someone else
- Cannot be kept safely away from traffic, heights, or other hazards
- Has a seizure, collapses, or is difficult to wake
- Has severe chest pain, major breathing difficulty, or extreme overheating

How the cause is found

A clinician will ask when the behaviour began, whether it is constant or comes in episodes, and what was happening around the time it started. Sleep, mood, stress, caffeine, substance use, and prescribed or non-prescribed medicines are important parts of the history.

For children, information from home and school may be helpful. The clinician may ask how

behaviour compares with that of children at a similar developmental stage. For adults, they may ask about childhood behaviour because some conditions begin early even when diagnosed later.

An assessment may include a physical examination and checks of pulse, temperature, or blood pressure. Blood tests are not needed for every person, but they may be used when symptoms suggest a thyroid problem or another medical cause.

There is no single test that explains all hyperactivity. Questionnaires may support an ADHD assessment, but they do not establish the diagnosis by themselves.

Treatment and self-care

Treatment depends on the cause and on how much the symptom affects daily life. Temporary restlessness may improve when the trigger passes or sleep returns to normal.

Helpful steps can include:

For children, calm reminders and praise for specific helpful behaviour are generally more useful than labelling them as "bad" or deliberately difficult.

If ADHD is diagnosed, support may involve environmental changes, education, behavioural approaches, or medication. Mood, thyroid, medication-related, and substance-related causes require different treatment. Discuss treatment choices with the clinician who completes the assessment.

- Keeping a regular sleep and waking schedule
- Reducing caffeine and avoiding energy drinks
- Planning movement breaks during long seated tasks
- Using short, clear instructions and predictable routines
- Recording sleep, mood, medicines, and when symptoms occur
- Choosing safe physical activity as an outlet for restlessness

What to expect

Hyperactivity caused by excitement, caffeine, or a short period of poor sleep may settle within hours or days. A continuing pattern may need further assessment and longer-term support.

Symptoms can change with age and situation. Visible running or climbing may become inner restlessness in adulthood. Stress, disrupted sleep, and demanding environments can make an

existing pattern more noticeable.

Keeping brief notes about timing, triggers, sleep, and effects on daily life can make follow-up more useful. Seek earlier advice if the behaviour becomes suddenly more intense or new symptoms appear.

Common questions

Is hyperactivity always ADHD?

No. ADHD is one possible explanation, but sleep loss, stress, stimulants, medicines, mood changes, and medical conditions can cause similar behaviour. ADHD assessment considers a persistent pattern, its effect on daily life, and whether symptoms occur in different settings.

Can adults be hyperactive?

Yes. Adults may pace or fidget, but hyperactivity can also feel like internal pressure, constant busyness, excessive talking, or difficulty resting.

Can too much sugar cause hyperactivity?

A direct link is not established for most people. Parties and similar situations often combine excitement, altered routines, less sleep, and sweet foods, making it difficult to identify one cause.

Should caffeine be stopped?

Reducing caffeine may help if it is contributing to restlessness or poor sleep. Avoid making abrupt changes to prescribed stimulant medicines without speaking to the prescriber.

Sources

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