

# UK children less likely to be diagnosed with ADHD

August 28 2013

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New research suggests that children are far less likely to be diagnosed with Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in the UK than they are in the USA. However, the same study, led by the University of Exeter Medical School, suggests that autism diagnosis is still rising. The study is published online in the *Journal of Autism Developmental Disorders*, published by Springer, and was supported by the NIHR Collaboration for Leadership in Applied Health Research and Care in the South West Peninsula (NIHR PenCLAHRC).

ADHD is thought to be the most common disorder of childhood. A 2009 study in the USA found that 6.3 per cent of children aged 5-9 were diagnosed with ADHD. In contrast, just 1.5 per cent of parents in the UK reported a diagnosis of ADHD in children aged between 6-8. The team looked at figures from the UK Millennium Cohort Study, which is a sample of more than 19,000 children, representative of the UK population.

Dr Ginny Russell of the University of Exeter Medical School, lead author of the study, said: "Our findings reveal that doctors in the UK are far less likely to deploy the ADHD label than their US counterparts. This difference may be a result of cultural factors. For example, more stringent criteria for diagnosing ADHD are used in the UK, or it may be that [parental concerns](#) over using drugs such as Ritalin to treat younger patients mean that they resist diagnosis for their children.

"It is important to identify diagnostic trends and the reasons behind

them, as various criteria in different cultural contexts may mean that children are missing out on health services - the diagnostic label may determine the support families receive," Dr Russell added. "Equally, it is important that children are not over-diagnosed."

The same study shows that [autism diagnosis](#) is on the rise. Some 1.7 per cent of parents reported that children aged 6-8 had been identified as having an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). "Increasing awareness of autism, the de-stigmatisation of ASD, and diagnosis of children at a younger age may all be contributing towards the label of ASD being used increasingly in the UK," Dr Russell said.

Questions remain over whether the rises in ASD diagnoses reflect 'real' rises in the frequency of the disorders or whether they are due entirely to changing diagnostic criteria and increased awareness. Dr Russell is currently examining data from two UK birth cohort studies to try to help establish whether there has been an increase in symptoms, or simply a rise in reporting and diagnosis. "It is important to establish if there is a real increase in children with symptoms because we can then try to discover the environmental or social factors behind the rise in order to take preventive measures," Dr Russell said.

Provided by University of Exeter

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