

Is Your ADHD Brain Hard-Wired for Weight Gain? By [Roberto Olivardia, Ph.D.](#)

<https://www.additudemag.com/adhd-and-obesity-hard-wired-for-weight-gain/>

If ADHD were an animal, it might be a jackrabbit or, better yet, a Boxer — energetic, playful, highly engaged, and did we mention energetic? This is the stereotype, anyway. But the reality is that ADHD (particularly the [inattentive type](#)) might just as easily be a lumbering Panda or Garfield the cat. In fact, ADHD does not automatically bring with it calorie-burning energy and a sleek physique. Its symptoms may actually trigger and exacerbate serious weight problems.

Indeed, decades of research show a strong correlation between [ADHD and obesity](#) — so strong, in fact, that someone with ADHD is [four times more likely](#) to become obese than is someone without ADHD.¹ Brain chemistry, poor impulse control, and erratic sleeping habits all conspire to encourage unhealthy eating — and to make weight loss feel impossible.

That doesn't mean an individual with ADHD is doomed to a life of obesity. But it does necessitate a serious understanding of ADHD's effect on food intake, [exercise habits](#), and overall health. Here's why ADHD may make you more prone to gaining unwanted weight — and what you can do to get healthy.

Why ADHD Often Leads to Obesity

Despite their assumed hyperactivity, people with ADHD are less physically active, eat less healthy foods, and have higher BMIs than do people without ADHD, according to studies. This may seem counterintuitive, but those who understand ADHD see why the connection makes sense: The symptoms of ADHD that make it hard to focus at school, succeed at work, or manage your relationships also make it exceedingly hard to eat properly and exercise on a regular schedule.

[[The ADHD-Dopamine Link: Why You Crave Sugar and Carbs](#)]

Some factors of ADHD that make it easier to slide toward obesity include:

Executive function deficits: Maintaining a healthy weight requires robust executive functioning skills — used for everything from planning balanced meals to sticking with that daily run. People with ADHD have naturally weaker executive functions, which makes starting (and keeping up with) a healthy daily routine much more taxing.

Impulsivity: ADHD and impulsivity are not synonymous, but individuals who do struggle with it know the devastating effect it can have on health. We are all bombarded with tantalizing (i.e. high-fat, high-sugar, high-carb) food on a daily basis. Most people can successfully manage their food-related impulses — and say no to a daily doughnut at the coffee shop, for instance. People with ADHD-fueled impulsivity cannot. Their impulsivity takes the wheel and they reach for (and devour) the junk food before their mind catches up to say, “No!”

Poor interoceptive awareness: Interoceptive awareness helps us sense what's going on inside our bodies — whether that's hunger cues, thirst markers, or physical fatigue. A person with ADHD, however, is oriented outward — always looking for the next source of stimulation. As a result, she may struggle to pay attention to and make sense of what her body is telling her. Someone with ADHD is more likely to interpret thirst (or boredom, or exhaustion) as hunger, and will often turn to food to fulfill that unclear internal need.

Poor sleep habits: A brain that's constantly whirring will find it hard to “shut down” at the end of the day and fall asleep, so it's no surprise that ADHD brings with it fitful or disordered sleep. And a wealth of research finds that sleep deprivation is a large factor in promoting obesity. When our bodies are sleep deprived, our brains release hormones that push us to overeat — particularly unhealthy foods that are high

in fat and sugar. Simultaneously, our metabolism drops as our bodies attempt to conserve fat. This is an evolutionary relic of our caveman past — when lack of sleep usually meant famine — but in modern times, it backfires on sleep-deprived ADHD bodies.

“Procrastineating:” There’s an ADHD tendency to put off boring tasks by eating instead, a phenomenon that’s been dubbed “procrastineating.” Ordering, waiting for, and devouring a cheesy pizza is infinitely more interesting to the ADHD brain than is writing a term paper. Therefore snacking becomes a tempting — albeit unhealthy — form of procrastination. (And it certainly doesn’t help us get our work done any faster, either!)

[\[Free Download: Stop Procrastinating!\]](#)

Low levels of neurotransmitters: ADHD is a neurological condition traced back to the brain’s neurotransmitters. The chemicals dopamine and GABA exist in insufficient amounts in the brains of people with ADHD. Dopamine regulates and promotes arousal; low levels of dopamine result in an under-aroused, “bored” brain. GABA controls inhibition. A person with adequate levels of these neurotransmitters can typically stop himself from eating an entire box of cookies. Someone with low levels does not receive the brain signals alerting him to potential long-term harm — his brain focuses only on how delicious (and stimulating) the cookies are right now.

Behavioral Changes to Manage Your Weight

Is your ADHD brain working against your waistline? Yes. Is it pointless to fight back? No. Healthy eating habits may actually lead to improved ADHD symptoms, which in turn leads to healthier eating. Getting started is the hardest part; here are some simple strategies to begin:

- 1. Spell out your goals.** The ADHD brain performs poorly when goals and motivation are only vaguely defined — weight loss resolutions only stick when you know exactly why you’re pursuing them. Think about the small- and big-picture reasons you want to lose weight: To live a longer life? To be more active with your kids? To fit in to that killer black dress again? Keep that goal in mind as you outline your weight-loss plan. With specifics, you’re much more likely to follow through.
- 2. Plan your meals.** Since ADHD leads to poor interoceptive awareness, people with ADHD may not notice they’re hungry until they’re starving. And by that time, it’s often too late to prepare a well-balanced meal because you’ve already called Domino’s. Manage this (and overall impulsivity) by setting aside a time each week to plan your meals so you’re prepared when hunger hits. Try setting an alarm for 7 PM on Thursday, and spend half an hour writing out a grocery list and deciding what you’re going to shop for and eat over the next week. The executive functions involved in this may feel overwhelming at first, but with practice, it will become easier.
- 3. Practice good sleep hygiene.** The first step to losing weight? Get more sleep. People with ADHD — particularly hyperactive type — tend to view sleep as unproductive or boring, but it’s actually critical to rebuilding your body and keeping your brain running smoothly. In addition to regulating your hormone levels, a good night of sleep will render you less moody, less stressed, and less likely to turn to food for comfort in fragile moments. To learn how to improve your sleep hygiene, [read this](#).

Reaching and maintaining a healthy weight will take effort — effort that may feel impossible to overcome, at first. But with clear goals, advanced planning, and better rest that effort will lessen over time. And when it starts to pay off, the results — for both your physical and your mental health — will be well worth it.

¹Fliers, Ellen A. et al. “ADHD Is a Risk Factor for Overweight and Obesity in Children.” *Journal of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics* : *JDBP* 34.8 (2013): 10.1097/DBP.0b013e3182a50a67. *PMC*. Web. 18 July 2017.

