ADHD & Coexisting Disorders in Adults
ADHD AND ADULTS
Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in adults is a recognized medical condition that often requires medical intervention. Establishing a diagnosis of ADHD in adulthood is complex and requires a careful history that looks for signs going back to childhood. Adding to the difficulty of diagnosing ADHD is that it is often accompanied by other coexisting conditions: it is estimated that as many as 77% of adults with ADHD may have at least one coexisting condition.

When two different diagnoses are present within the same patient at the same time, the diseases or illnesses are said to be comorbid. A significant proportion of adults with ADHD may have one or more coexisting conditions, such as:

- Learning disorders
- Anxiety disorders
- Mood disorders (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder)
- Substance use disorders

In addition to treating the symptoms of ADHD, you may require medication and/or counselling to help control the symptoms of any coexisting disorder(s).
LEARNING DISORDERS
ADHD is not a learning disability, but rates of learning disabilities that coexist with ADHD have been reported in the range of 19 to 80% depending on the definition used. Both disorders can cause problems in school, and they may continue to cause difficulties into adult life. Specialized testing can also help differentiate between attention problems and specific learning issues. By adulthood, some may have developed coping strategies (such as keyboarding instead of writing), but special accommodations and coaching may also be helpful in dealing with learning problems.

“Testing can help differentiate between attention problems and learning issues”

ANXIETY DISORDERS
The findings of a recent study have shown that by their young adult years, youth with ADHD were at high risk for a range of psychiatric disorders, including increased rates of anxiety disorders. Indeed, about 50% of adults with ADHD also have some form of anxiety disorder (social anxiety disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder) (see glossary). People with anxiety disorders may have extreme feelings of fear, worry or panic, experience obsessions or compulsions or suffer from nightmares. Counselling and/or medication may be needed to treat anxiety disorders in their own right.
**MOOD DISORDERS**
People with ADHD are also more likely to suffer from a mood disorder (e.g., depression, bipolar disorder): in a recent study, 38% of adults with ADHD had a major mood disorder, compared to 11% of adults without ADHD.

**Depression**
The study mentioned above found that about 18% of adults with ADHD suffered from major depression. People with attention problems may often have to deal with failure and may become demoralized or depressed as a result. Similarly to ADHD, patients who are depressed may have trouble eating, sleeping, and concentrating; the difference is that people who are depressed tend to have a consistently negative mood. People with depression often require a different type of medication than those normally used to treat ADHD.

**Bipolar disorder**
The majority of children with bipolar disorder also have ADHD, and adults with ADHD have been found to have much higher rates of bipolar disorder — 19%, compared to 3% in people without ADHD. Differentiating between bipolar disorder and ADHD can be a challenge since they have many overlapping symptoms, but a new and sudden onset of increased energy, irritability and decreased need to sleep may be a signal of mania, since ADHD develops over the long term.

**SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS**
Adults with undiagnosed ADHD have two to three times the risk of developing a substance abuse problem, including marijuana use, alcoholism, smoking, and other drug use.
In a recent study, 38% of adults with ADHD had a major mood disorder.
SUMMARY
Comorbid disorders frequently occur in adults with ADHD and it is critical to identify these conditions so that they can be effectively treated. Talk to your doctor if you think you may also have a comorbid disorder.

GLOSSARY
Obsessive compulsive disorder is a condition involving obsessions (persistent, often irrational, and seemingly uncontrollable thoughts) and compulsions (actions or “rituals” that are used to neutralize the obsessions).

Social anxiety disorder is a persistent fear of social or performance situations in which the person is exposed to unfamiliar people or scrutiny by others.

Post-traumatic stress disorder involves the development of characteristic symptoms after a traumatic event. People may have intense fear and helplessness, or relive the event over and over.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
There are many reliable sources of information on ADHD. A good place to start is:

- www.caddra.ca (The Canadian Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder Resource Alliance)
- www.ldac-acta.ca (The Learning Disabilities Association of Canada)
- www.chaddcanada.org (Children and Adults with A.D.D.)