# NHS England faces surge in undiagnosed ADHD cases amid rising demand and service delays



New NHS England data paints a concerning picture regarding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) in the UK, estimating that nearly 2.5 million people in England may be affected by the condition. These figures, grounded in earlier estimates from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, suggest that ADHD impacts around three to four per cent of adults and five per cent of children and young individuals. However, only about one-third of those estimated to have ADHD are currently diagnosed, resulting in significant gaps in care as more than 549,000 individuals were reported to be awaiting assessment by the end of March 2025. This marks a stark increase from the previous year, fuelling rising concerns around NHS resource allocation and treatment accessibility.

Critics have voiced apprehensions that the narrative surrounding ADHD might be influenced by a perception of an epidemic of diagnosis, suggesting that individuals are inadvertently ‘wasting’ NHS resources, a sentiment often directed towards those seeking mental health support. A study from the University of Huddersfield and Aston University indicated an 18 per cent year-on-year rise in ADHD prescriptions since the pandemic, which sparked debates about the legitimacy of these diagnoses. This spike followed a historical trend where increased awareness, such as the 50 per cent rise in prescriptions documented between 2007 and 2012 under new NICE guidelines, correlates with higher rates of diagnosis.

Public discourse around ADHD has been notably shaped by social media, particularly platforms like TikTok, with videos tagged #adhd garnering two billion views in the UK over the past year. This surge in engagement has been instrumental in raising awareness, leading many individuals, particularly young women, to seek assessments. Data indicates a fivefold increase in ADHD medication prescriptions among women aged 25 to 34 in the first quarter of 2024 compared to early 2019, reflecting a growing recognition of the condition's nuances and how it manifests differently across genders.

While heightened awareness is crucial, the overwhelming demand for ADHD services has compounded existing challenges within the NHS. The Nuffield Trust has reported delays of up to two years for assessments, with up to 196,000 individuals awaiting ADHD evaluations—figures likely underestimated due to incomplete data reporting. Long waiting lists and widespread medication shortages have exacerbated the frustration felt by many seeking help. The Department of Health and Social Care is being urged to devise a national ADHD strategy aimed at combating these delays and improving access to timely support.

Advocates for ADHD awareness stress that many individuals with the condition experience significant functional impairments, questioning the societal stigma associated with such diagnoses. Critics often invoke the phrase "everyone wants a diagnosis these days" to dismiss the very real struggles experienced by those with ADHD, suggesting that dialogue on mental health issues must evolve to dismantle misconceptions. Within this framework, support services and peer networks, particularly on social media, play an important role, yet they cannot fully substitute for timely professional assessments.

A poignant illustration of the societal misunderstanding surrounding ADHD and disability came from conversation with individuals reliant on personal independence payments (PIP) following government reforms aimed at encouraging disabled individuals back into work. Many recipients expressed frustration over misconceptions that those requiring support cannot be productive members of society. The disparity between societal expectations and the lived realities of those with ADHD or physical disabilities necessitates a cultural shift in understanding and empathy.

Looking to the future, the rise in ADHD diagnoses could potentially stimulate a re-evaluation of societal norms around mental health and disability. Drawing parallels to attitudes regarding left-handedness, which moved from stigma to acceptance within the last century, advocates hope for a similar trajectory in understanding ADHD. Historical narratives reveal that many conditions were once shrouded in stigma and misinformation, indicating a need for continued advocacy, support, and education.

In the pursuit of bettering ADHD services, a national task force has been proposed to establish quality controls and create a needs-based support system. The urgency of this task is underscored by the growing number of individuals seeking help across the UK, prompting a reassessment of how ADHD is understood both at the systemic level and within public consciousness. By fostering an environment of support and understanding, society can begin to bridge the gap between awareness and care, ultimately ensuring that individuals with ADHD are met with the respect and assistance they deserve.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/98340a65-5438-44eb-8462-7ce15212ded2)
* Paragraph 3 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c03ldwy89y0o)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/98340a65-5438-44eb-8462-7ce15212ded2), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68725973)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html), [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c720r1pxrx5o)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68725973), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england/independent-investigation-of-the-national-health-service-in-england-accessible-version)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/98340a65-5438-44eb-8462-7ce15212ded2)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4)
* Paragraph 9 – [[6]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c720r1pxrx5o), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68725973)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/adhd-diagnosis-nhs-england-stigma-b2760582.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/a620597a-d36f-4fd2-9941-41784f807eb4> - An article from the Financial Times reports that nearly 2.5 million people in England are estimated to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), yet only about a third have received a diagnosis. This marks the first official publication on ADHD prevalence in the country, identifying approximately 1.6 million adults and 888,000 children and young adults with the condition. Despite expectations that ADHD affects 3-4% of adults and 5% of children, only 1.3% have it documented in GP records. The NHS has faced a surge in referrals, influenced in part by increased awareness on social media platforms like TikTok, leading to overwhelming waiting lists—549,000 patients as of March 2025, up by a third since the previous year. This delay has driven many to seek private assessments, exacerbating concerns around care quality and healthcare inequality. Anita Thapar, chair of the ADHD task force, emphasized the importance of timely support, while ADHD UK’s CEO Henry Shelford criticized inadequate NHS funding and called for a national ADHD strategy. The task force plans to propose improvements, including quality controls and a needs-based support model, with recommendations expected later this summer. The Department of Health and Social Care reiterated its commitment to reducing delays and improving patient access through its healthcare reform plan.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/98340a65-5438-44eb-8462-7ce15212ded2> - An article from the Financial Times highlights a significant rise in ADHD diagnoses among women, particularly young women, attributed to increased awareness through platforms like TikTok. In the first quarter of 2024, 19,400 women aged 25 to 34 received ADHD medications, more than five times the number at the start of 2019. This surge is partly due to the unique ways ADHD manifests in women, leading to underdiagnosis in the past. TikTok videos with the hashtag #adhd garnered 2 billion views in the UK over the past year, contributing to heightened awareness. However, the article also notes a global medication shortage and long waiting times for assessments, urging more research and targeted investments to expand capacity and improve standards. Despite these challenges, the NHS spent £126 million on ADHD medications in the year leading up to March 2024, and the government plans to establish an expert team to investigate the challenges facing ADHD services.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-68725973> - A BBC News report discusses the NHS's inability to meet the growing demand for autism and ADHD assessments. The Nuffield Trust reported that 24% of patients referred for ADHD in England were facing waits of one to two years for an assessment. Additionally, thousands of individuals with ADHD have been unable to obtain prescribed medication due to a major supply shortage, announced in September, attributed to manufacturing issues and increased global demand. The report also highlights that 172,000 adults and children are on a waiting list for an autism assessment—the highest recorded figure—according to NHS data analysed by the think tank. Between October and December 2023, the median time spent on a waiting list after an autism referral rose to over nine months, compared with four months in the same period in 2019. In Derbyshire, the waiting time was two and a half years, according to the report. Ellie Middleton, a creator, writer, and consultant with autism and ADHD, shared her experience of receiving late diagnoses, stating that it has been 'life-saving' for her.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c03ldwy89y0o> - A BBC News investigation reveals that clearing the backlog of ADHD assessments in Gloucestershire could take 89 years. The report indicates that there are more than 1,600 people on the waiting list, with just 18 full assessments being carried out in 2023. Alice Gardener, a resident who waited three years for an assessment, expressed concern over the prolonged wait times, stating, 'It shouldn't be taking this long. Undiagnosed ADHD can have a substantial effect on someone's life.' Gloucestershire Health and Care NHS Foundation Trust acknowledged the issue and stated they are recruiting new staff to reduce the backlog. The report underscores the significant challenges faced by the NHS in addressing the growing demand for ADHD assessments.
6. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c720r1pxrx5o> - A BBC News article highlights that in 24 services, it would take eight years or more to clear their backlogs of ADHD assessments. The figures suggest only two trusts would take less than a year to see all the patients on their waiting list. Some 53 services provided data on the numbers waiting, indicating that the 196,000 on waiting lists is an underestimate of the total number across the UK. Thea Stein, chief executive of health think tank the Nuffield Trust, commented on the unprecedented growth in demand for ADHD services, stating, 'We’re seeing more people than ever seeking support from ADHD services which are struggling to meet this demand.' The article also notes that all four UK governments are working to improve matters, with NHS England launching an independent expert taskforce to investigate the challenges facing ADHD services and help manage the rising numbers of referrals.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-investigation-of-the-nhs-in-england/independent-investigation-of-the-national-health-service-in-england-accessible-version> - The UK government's Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England discusses the exponential growth in demand for ADHD and autism assessments in recent years. Since 2019, the number of children waiting at least 13 weeks for an assessment for autism has increased at a rate of 65% per year, while for adults, the increase has been 77% per year. As of March 2024, there were still more than 70,000 children and young people under 18 and more than 50,000 adults waiting at least 13 weeks for an assessment for autism. The report highlights the significant mismatch between demand for assessment and their availability, with an average of eight years required to clear the backlog in adult ADHD assessments at current rates. The investigation emphasizes the need for a national strategy and political focus to address this issue.