Could It Be ADHD?

Randye F. Huron, M.D., has a simple piece of advice for parents concerned that their child may have attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD): Don’t resign yourself to worried waiting.

“If a parent — or the child’s teacher — has a concern, it should be addressed, not dismissed, discounted or deferred,” says Dr. Huron, medical director of the Institute for Child Development at the Joseph M. Sanzari Children’s Hospital of Hackensack University Medical Center (HackensackUMC). “Prompt evaluation will either determine that there is not an issue or, if the child does prove to have ADHD or some other condition, allow for early identification and intervention, which can make a huge difference in the child’s current situation and progress over the long term.”

Dr. Huron is among six developmental pediatricians on staff at the institute, whose multidisciplinary staff also works with children with autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome and other developmental and behavioral conditions. She notes that while the prevalence of ADHD has been increasing in recent years, so has parent and teacher awareness of the disorder and the medical profession’s ability to help patients by means of multimodal approaches that may or may not include prescription medications.

“A recent study found that roughly 11 percent of children in the United States ages 4 to 17 were diagnosed with ADHD,” notes Dr. Huron. She is quick to add, however, that many factors and conditions other than ADHD can be responsible for a young person’s inattention or seeming hyperactivity. “ADHD is a very complicated diagnosis to make because the symptoms of the disorder are behaviors or attributes that many children can display for many different reasons,” she notes.

Dr. Huron recommends two steps when a parent is worried that his or her child may have ADHD. First, reach out to teachers, afterschool baby sitters and others who spend time with the child on a regular basis to see if they also have observed the behaviors causing concern, and to ask if they might have a possible explanation. Second, promptly contact the child’s pediatrician or other health-care provider to explain your concerns and what you and others have observed.

When pediatricians or other health-care professionals refer children with suspected ADHD to the institute for assessment, the evaluation process includes an extremely detailed history, a comprehensive physical exam and neurodevelopmental testing, employing various rating scales and other instruments.

And when Dr. Huron does arrive at a diagnosis of ADHD?

“One of the first things I tell parents and children is that there is an incredible number of very, very successful people with ADHD,” she says, adding, “I don’t think this is as daunting a diagnosis for parents as it was many years ago, largely because of everything we’re able to do now for children and young adults who have ADHD. The key, however, is for parents to trust themselves and their knowledge of their children when they have concerns, and to follow up on those concerns with their pediatrician or other health-care provider.”