

What is Autism?

Autism Spectrum Disorders* are a range of complex developmental disorders that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others. They are neurological disorders, which means they affect the functioning of the brain. How autism disorders affect an individual and the severity of symptoms are different in each person.

Autism is usually first diagnosed in childhood. About 1 in 110 children is diagnosed with autism. Autism Spectrum Disorders are three to four times more common in boys than in girls.

Autism is a lifelong disorder in most cases, though there are more and more cases of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders who eventually function independently, leading full lives. The information here focuses more on children and adolescents.

Symptoms

Autism differs from person to person in severity and combinations of symptoms. There is a great range of abilities and characteristics of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders—no two children appear or behave the same way. Symptoms can range from mild to severe and often change over time.

Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders include:

- * **Communication problems – difficulty using or understanding language. Some children with autism focus their attention and conversation on a few topic areas, some frequently repeat phrases, and some have very limited speech.**
- * **Difficulty relating to people, things, and events – trouble making friends and interacting with people; difficulty reading facial expressions; may not make eye contact**
- * **Repetitive body movements or behaviors – hand flapping or repeating sounds or phrases**

Many children with autism are attentive to routines and sameness and have difficulty adjusting to unfamiliar surroundings or changes in routine. Many people with autism have normal cognitive skills, while others have cognitive challenges. Some are at greater risk for some medical conditions such as sleep problems and seizures.

Diagnosis

Early diagnosis and treatment are important to reducing the symptoms of autism and improving the quality of life for people with autism and their families. There is no medical test for autism. It is diagnosed based on watching how the child talks and acts in comparison to other children of the same age. Trained professionals typically diagnose autism by talking with the child and asking questions of parents and other caregivers.

Under federal law, any child suspected of having a developmental disorder can get a free evaluation. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be screened for developmental disorders at well-child preventive visits before age three.

Causes

The exact causes of Autism Spectrum Disorders are not clear. Several factors probably contribute to autism, including the genes a child is born with and environmental factors. The risk of autism is greater if there is a family member with autism. Research has shown that it is not caused by bad parenting, and it is not caused by vaccines.

Treatment

While children are not typically cured and don't outgrow autism, studies have shown that it can improve with early diagnosis and treatment. There is no single treatment for autism; treatments generally address behavioral and learning skills. Treatments can include intensive skill-building and educational sessions, known as applied behavior analysis or ABA, and many more interactive, child-centered versions of behavior treatments. Treatment may also involve special training and support for parents, speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, and/or social skills training.

Also, some children and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorders have other kinds of psychological difficulties at some point in their lives, such as anxiety, attention deficits and/or hyperactivity, disruptive behaviors, or depression. These difficulties can be treated with therapy or medication. There are currently no medications that directly treat the core features of Autism Spectrum Disorders.

In addition to treatment, regular and special education classrooms can be changed to help a student with autism. Many students with autism can function better if the day is consistent and predictable. It is helpful if information is presented so that students can learn by seeing as well as hearing, and if students get to play and learn with nondisabled peers. A federal law — the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA — requires that special services be available to children identified with a disability. The services can include early intervention, support for birth through 3 years, and special education for ages 3 through 21.

Use of complementary and alternative treatments, such as special nutritional supplements and diets, is common among children with autism. To date, there is little scientific evidence that such treatments are effective, and they can have negative consequences, so it is important to talk to your doctor before trying them.

Parent tips

- * **Learn as much as possible**
- * **Provide consistent structure and routine**
- * **Connect with other parents of children with autism**
- * **Seek professional help**
- * **Take time for yourself and other family members**

Having a child with autism affects the whole family. It can be stressful, time-consuming, and expensive. Paying attention to the physical and emotional health of the whole family is important.

Many national and local advocacy organizations provide information, resources, and support to individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders and their families. A few are on the next page.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

LET'S
TALK
FACTS
ABOUT



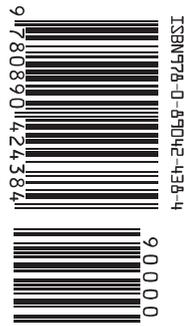
Healthy Minds.
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www.healthyminds.org



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Resources

For more information, please contact:

Autism Society

www.autism-society.org

Autism Speaks

www.autismspeaks.org

American Psychiatric Association

www.healthyminds.org

American Academy of Pediatrics

www.aap.org

CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)

www.cdc.gov

NICHCY (link to state resources)

www.nichcy.org

*ASD includes autism, PDD-NOS (pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified), and Asperger's syndrome (the three most common). Asperger's syndrome falls within the autism spectrum but is characterized by fluent language and no intellectual disability and is usually used to describe children who are fully included in school. PDD-NOS has sometimes been used as a "working diagnosis" with young children, or children with milder forms of autism or children with less obvious repetitive behaviors.



One in a series of brochures designed to reduce stigma associated with mental illnesses by promoting informed factual discussion of the disorders and their psychiatric treatments. This brochure was developed for educational purposes and does not necessarily reflect the opinions or policy of the American Psychiatric Association. For more information, please visit www.healthyminds.org.

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