

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

Let's talk about Autism

People with autism spectrum disorder often display differences in social behavior and communication, intense interests, and repetitive behaviors.

After autism spectrum disorder is diagnosed, intervention should begin as soon as possible. Early intervention and proper care can reduce individuals' challenges while helping them learn new skills and make the most of their strengths.

What is ASD?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is described as a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life.

According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), a guide created by the American Psychiatric Association that health care providers use to diagnose mental disorders, people with ASD often have:

- Difficulty with communication and interaction with other people
- Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors
- Symptoms that affect their ability to function in school, work, and other areas of life

Autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience.

People of all genders, races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds can be diagnosed with ASD. Although ASD can be a lifelong disorder, treatments and services can improve a person's symptoms and daily functioning. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children receive screening for autism. Caregivers should talk to their child's health care provider about ASD screening or evaluation.

Signs & Symptoms

Social behaviors may include:

- Making little or inconsistent eye contact
- Appearing not to look at or listen to people who are talking
- Infrequently sharing interest, emotion, or enjoyment of objects or activities (including infrequently pointing at or showing things to others)
- Not responding or being slow to respond to one's name or to other verbal bids for attention
- Having difficulties with the back and forth of conversation
- Often talking at length about a favorite subject without noticing that others are not interested or without giving others a chance to respond
- Displaying facial expressions, movements, and gestures that do not match what is being said
- Having an unusual tone of voice that may sound sing-song or flat and robot-like
- Having trouble understanding another person's point of view or being unable to predict or understand other people's actions
- Difficulties adjusting behavior to different social situations
- Difficulties sharing in imaginative play or in making friends

Restrictive/repetitive behaviors may include:

- Repeating certain behaviors or having unusual behaviors, such as repeating words or phrases (a behavior called echolalia)
- Having a lasting intense interest in specific topics, such as numbers, details, or facts

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Iroquois Center for Human Development
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Source: National Institute of Mental Health



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Signs & Symptoms (cont.)

Restrictive/repetitive behaviors may include:

- Showing overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or with parts of objects
- Becoming upset by slight changes in a routine and having difficulty with transitions
- Being more sensitive or less sensitive than other people to sensory input, such as light, sound, clothing, or temperature

People with ASD also may experience sleep problems and irritability.

People on the autism spectrum also may have many strengths, including:

- Being able to learn things in detail and remember information for long periods of time
- Being strong visual and auditory learners
- Excelling in math, science, music, or art

How is it treated?

People with ASD may face a wide range of issues, which means there is no single best treatment for ASD. Working closely with a health care provider is an important part of finding the right combination of treatments and services.

How is ASD diagnosed?

Health care providers diagnose ASD by evaluating a person's behavior and development. ASD can usually be reliably diagnosed by the age of 2. It is important to seek an evaluation as soon as possible. The earlier ASD is diagnosed, the sooner treatments and services can begin.

Diagnosis in young children is often a two-stage process.

Stage 1: General Developmental Screening During Well-Child Checkups

Every child should receive well-child checkups with a pediatrician or an early childhood health care provider. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children receive screening for developmental delays at their 9-, 18-, and 24- or 30-month well-child visits, with specific autism screenings at the 18- and 24-month well-child visits. A child may receive additional screenings if they are at high risk for ASD or developmental problems.

Considering caregivers' experiences and concerns is an important part of the screening process for young children. The health care provider may ask questions about the child's behaviors and evaluate those answers in combination with information from ASD screening tools and clinical observations of the child. To learn more about ASD screening tools, visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website.

If a child shows developmental differences in behavior or functioning during this screening process, the health care provider may refer the child for additional evaluation.

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How is ASD diagnosed (cont.)

Stage 2: Additional Diagnostic Evaluation

It is important to accurately detect and diagnose children with ASD as early as possible, as this will shed light on their unique strengths and challenges. Early detection also can help caregivers determine which services, educational programs, and behavioral therapies are most likely to be helpful for their child.

A team of health care providers who have experience diagnosing ASD will conduct the diagnostic evaluation. This team may include child neurologists, developmental behavioral pediatricians, speech-language pathologists, child psychologists and psychiatrists, educational specialists, and occupational therapists.

The diagnostic evaluation is likely to include:

- Medical and neurological examinations
- Assessment of the child's cognitive abilities
- Assessment of the child's speech and language abilities
- Observation of the child's behavior
- An in-depth conversation with the child's caregivers about the child's behavior and development
- Assessment of age-appropriate skills needed to complete daily activities independently, such as eating, dressing, and toileting
- Questions about the child's family history

Because ASD is a complex disorder that sometimes occurs with other illnesses or learning disorders, the comprehensive evaluation may include blood tests and a hearing test.

The outcome of this evaluation may result in a formal diagnosis and recommendations for treatment.

Diagnosis in Older Children and Adolescents

Caregivers and teachers are often the first to recognize ASD symptoms in older children and adolescents who attend school. The school's special education team may perform an initial evaluation and then recommend that a child undergo additional evaluation with their primary health care provider or a health care provider who specializes in ASD.

A child's caregivers may talk with these health care providers about the child's social difficulties, including problems with subtle communication. These subtle communication differences may include problems understanding tone of voice, facial expressions, or body language. Older children and adolescents may have trouble understanding figures of speech, humor, or sarcasm. They also may have trouble forming friendships with peers.

Diagnosis in Adults

Diagnosing ASD in adults is often more difficult than diagnosing ASD in children. In adults, some ASD symptoms can overlap with symptoms of other mental health disorders, such as an anxiety disorder or attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Adults who notice signs and symptoms of ASD should talk with a health care provider and ask for a referral for an ASD evaluation.

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