

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a life-long neurodevelopmental disorder that is present at birth, with the first signs usually noticeable by 12 to 24 months of age. The disorder is variable: some children may have average intelligence but are seriously hampered by their lack of day-to-day living and problem-solving (adaptive) skills. On the other hand, some children may have lower intelligence, but may experience less impairment because of their good adaptive skills.

What are the symptoms of ASD?

Parents should be concerned if their child does not

- babble by 11 months of age
- wave or use other simple gestures by 12 months
- use single words by 18 months or 2 word phrases (e.g., car go) by 24 months
- answer to his/her name
- make eye contact when interacting with peers or adults
- try to get his/her parents' attention

or, if the child

- prefers solitary, repetitive activities
- fails to take part in imaginative play with toys (doesn't "play pretend")
- engages in rocking or spinning movements
- becomes entranced by movement of objects
- moves hands or fingers oddly
- lines up toys rather than playing with them
- needs to perform activities in a certain way and becomes upset if prevented from doing so

ASD is diagnosed if two types of symptoms are present. The first is problems with social communication, and the second is restricted or repetitive behaviors and interests.

Social communication challenges include the inability to understanding the give and take of interactions, showing facial expressions or body language that don't match the social situation

(e.g., smiling when talking about a death), and making and retaining friends. Examples of restrictive and repetitive behaviours include rocking, shaking the hands, or repeating phrases over and over again. Children and adults with ASD often demand that routines be maintained, and any deviation from them can cause extreme anxiety and tantrums. Some people with ASD become "stuck" observing or lining up objects, to the exclusion of everything else around them, or talk about nothing but their favourite topic.

Children with ASD often avoid eye contact with other people. They have trouble understanding what other people are feeling or thinking because they have difficulty understanding facial expressions or tone of voice. They seem unable to look for clues about appropriate behaviour by looking at other people's faces. These problems also mean that they often lack empathy for others.

Assessment of the severity of ASD is based on the level of support a person needs to carry out usual activities of daily living.

Compared to their typically developing peers, adolescents and adults with ASD are at increased risk of developing depression, anxiety, and ADHD, and sleep problems, although the reasons are not well understood. These conditions can interfere with their ability to learn, have friendships, and hold down a job.

How common is ASD?

The current estimate is that 1 in 68 children have ASD.

How long does it last?

ASD is a condition in which the symptoms persist from infancy and throughout adulthood.

What causes ASD?

While no one yet knows the exact cause of ASD, researchers have found several mutated (altered) genes in individuals with ASD. However, these same genes are also found in some individuals who have no signs or symptoms of ASD. This likely means that another factor or factors must interact with the genes to produce ASD in a person.

We do know that vaccines do not cause ASD. Research has also shown that parenting styles don't cause ASD, although they do influence how well children do in life.

What treatments are effective?

Most children with autism spectrum disorders do respond to treatment, but it is a case of "the sooner the better" because the best gains are made when they are young. Children who receive early interventions definitely do better in the long run compared to children who did not receive such treatment.

Aggression, irritability, and repetitive behaviours can be managed with behavioural therapy. There are a lot of unproven remedies, many promoted on the Web, that are costly and time consuming, but, more importantly, can also cause harm. Families need to ensure they have good information about evidence-based treatments for ASD. Use the following websites for reliable information about ASD.

OTHER RESOURCES:

More resources are available at offordcentre.com.

Please visit offordcentre.com/research/knowledge/resources for websites and books on this topic.



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Go to offordcentre.com/research/knowledge for electronic versions of this pamphlet.