

What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. There is often nothing about how people with ASD look that sets them apart from other people, but people with ASD may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most other people. The learning, thinking, and problem-solving abilities of people with ASD can range from gifted to severely challenged. Some people with ASD need a lot of help in their daily lives; others need less. Autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors and is a “spectrum condition” that affects people differently and to varying degrees. The diagnosis of ASD remains for the lifetime of an individual, although some individuals may be able to learn skills and strategies that enable them to no longer display the symptoms of autism.

A diagnosis of ASD now includes several conditions that used to be diagnosed separately: autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome. These conditions are now all called autism spectrum disorder. While there is currently no known single cause of autism, early diagnosis helps a person receive the support and services that they need, which can lead to a quality life, filled with opportunity.

Characteristics & Diagnosis

Diagnosing ASD can be difficult since there is no medical test, like a blood test, to diagnose the disorder. Doctors look at the child’s behavior and development to make a diagnosis. ASD can sometimes be detected at 18 months or younger. By age 2, a diagnosis by an experienced professional can be considered very reliable. However, many children do not receive a final diagnosis until much older. Early diagnosis allows for early intervention services targeted to meet the individual needs of the child.

Autism is characterized in the DSM-V by:

1. Persistent differences in communication, interpersonal relationships, and social interaction across different environments

What this can look like: Being nonverbal, having delayed speech, or having atypical speech patterns, having trouble understanding nonverbal communication or gestures, difficulty maintaining typical back-and-forth conversational style, atypical use of eye contact and facial expressions

2. Restricted and repetitive behavior, patterns, activities and interests, including sensory differences

What this can look like: Repeating sounds or phrases (echolalia), repetitive movements, preference for sameness and difficulty with transition or routine, rigid or highly restricted and intense interests, extreme sensitivity to, or significantly lower sensitivity to, various sensory exposures

According to the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which is used by clinicians to diagnose autism, these core features of autism must be present in early childhood but may not fully manifest until social demands exceed the person’s capacity to cope with them, and challenges may be masked by learned coping strategies.

Causes and Risk Factors

We do not know all of the causes of ASD. However, we have learned that there are likely many causes for multiple types of ASD. There may be many different factors that make a child more likely to have an ASD, including environmental, biologic, and genetic factors. Most scientists agree that genes are one of the risk factors that can make a person more likely to develop ASD. Children who have a sibling with ASD are at a higher risk of also having ASD. Individuals with certain genetic or chromosomal conditions can have a greater chance of having ASD. When taken during pregnancy, the prescription drugs valproic acid and thalidomide have been linked with a higher risk of ASD. There is some evidence that the critical period for developing ASD occurs before, during, and immediately after birth. Children born to older parents are at greater risk for having ASD.

Who is Affected?

ASD occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, but is about 4 times more common among boys than among girls.

* Adapted from <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html> and <https://www.autism-society.org/what-is/>

More information and resources related to Autism are available here:

<https://nationalautismcenter.org/>
<https://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/index.html>