

What is Autism?



Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that affects people's ability to understand what they see, hear, and otherwise sense. Individuals with ASD typically have difficulty understanding verbal and nonverbal communication and learning appropriate ways of relating to people, objects, and events. As its name implies, ASD affects individuals differently and with varying degrees of severity. While typically diagnosed in children, ASD is a lifelong disorder that affects individuals of all ages.

A child or adult with ASD might:

- Not respond to his/her name
- Not point at objects to show interest
- Not look at objects that are pointed out by someone else
- Exhibit a lack of interest in others
- Repeat words or phrases
- Experience language delay
- Prefer not to be held or cuddled
- Display unusual distress reactions
- Experience over- or under-sensitivity to sensory stimuli



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“My son will always have autism, but with the right support and resources, he has overcome many challenges, and I know he can have a happy and successful life.”
– a parent

What causes ASD?

No one knows exactly what causes ASD. Many researchers believe there is a strong genetic component. Some research suggests a physical problem affecting the parts of the brain that process language and information; other studies point to an imbalance of brain chemicals. Possible external or environmental triggers are also being considered.

How common is autism?

Autism is the second most common developmental disability, following intellectual disability. As many as 1 in 36 children may be diagnosed with ASD in the United States, according to the CDC.

How is autism diagnosed?

An accurate diagnosis is made by observing and assessing an individual’s communication, behavior, and social developmental levels. There are no medical tests that diagnose Autism Spectrum Disorder. However, because ASD shares behavioral characteristics with other disorders, medical tests may be ordered to rule out other possible causes for the symptoms being exhibited. Caregiver input and developmental history are very important components in making an accurate diagnosis.

“At age 67, 21 years after my autism diagnosis, I am still learning and growing. It’s hard work, but it’s worth it!”

– autistic adult & parent

How is autism treated?

Studies show that individuals with ASD respond well to a highly structured, specialized education program tailored to their needs, and that early intervention provides the most positive outcomes. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is an empirically proven, effective therapeutic approach. Related evidence-based practices include visual supports, social narratives, and modeling. Often, treatments that may help to address co-occurring conditions include speech therapy, sensory therapy, occupational therapy, and medication. At this time, no cure has been found for ASD. However, with individualized treatment, education, and support, children and adults with ASD can improve and develop skills that will allow them to live and participate in their community.