

Understanding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Autism is found in every country and region of the world, and in families of all racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. In the United States, 1 in 68 children, or 1.46%, have autism.¹

What is autism?

Autism and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are general terms for a complex developmental disability that usually appears before age three. ASD covers a broad range of symptoms, skills, and levels of impairment. Children and adults with ASD may have intellectual disabilities, difficulties with motor coordination, and problems relating socially to others.

How is autism diagnosed?

Parents are typically the first to notice unusual behaviors or developmental delays in their child. In some cases, the child may seem “different” from birth, although the first signs of autism often appear in young children who had previously been developing normally. When an affectionate, bubbly toddler suddenly becomes silent, withdrawn, violent, or self-abusive, something may be wrong.

There is no specific medical test, such as a blood test, to diagnose ASD. Doctors look at the child’s behavior and development. Although ASD can be identified in children as young as 18 months, many children do not receive a final diagnosis until they are much older. Diagnosing ASD takes two steps:

- **A developmental screening:** this test helps the doctor tell if the child is learning basic skills at the expected time or if there are delays in development.
- **A comprehensive diagnostic evaluation:** this evaluation includes a thorough review of the child’s behavior and development, and feedback from parents. It may also include hearing and vision screening, genetic testing, neurological testing, and other medical tests.

Sometimes a primary care doctor may refer the child and family to a specialist for further assessment. Specialists include developmental pediatricians, child psychiatrists, and child neurologists.

What are the signs and symptoms?

Signs of ASD begin during early childhood and typically last throughout the person’s lifetime. Children or adults with ASD might:

- have trouble relating to others or appear disinterested in others
- repeat actions over and over, such as rocking or hand-flapping
- have delayed language and motor skills
- avoid eye contact
- dislike physical contact
- repeat or echo words or phrases
- have difficulty expressing their needs
- get very upset by changes in routine
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound

1. <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/data.html>



What causes autism?

There is no known single cause of ASD. Genetic, environmental, and biological factors are thought to play a role. However, a child's risk for autism is higher if he/she:

- has a sibling with ASD
- is born to older parents
- has certain genetic or chromosomal conditions
- is born very prematurely

Treatment for autism

While there is no cure for ASD, it is treatable. Research shows that early intervention treatment services can greatly improve a child's development and help him/her learn important skills. Different types of treatment may include:

- behavior and communication approaches
- medication
- dietary changes
- complementary and alternative medicine

Resources

Autism Speaks

www.autismspeaks.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism

National Autism Association

www.nationalautismassociation.org