

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 2 years of life.

What are the signs and symptoms of ASD?

The list below gives some examples of common types of behaviors in people diagnosed with ASD.

Social communication / interaction 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 infrequent 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 behaviors to 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
- Showing overly focused interests, such as with moving objects or 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 may also 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

What are the causes and risk factors for ASD?

- Having a sibling with ASD
- Having older parents
- Having certain genetic conditions (such as Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome)
- Having a very low birth weight

How is ASD diagnosed?

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