

Autism Spectrum Disorder

KEY POINTS

- A person with autism spectrum disorder has problems communicating, getting along with others, repetitive behaviors, and has a very narrow range of interests.
 - Treatment may include medicines, social skills training, therapy, and learning ways to manage stress.
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What is autism spectrum disorder?

A person with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has problems communicating, getting along with others, repetitive behaviors, and has a very narrow range of interests. ASD used to be called by different names:

- **Autism**, a disorder in which you have problems with communicating and getting along with others. You may have unusual or repetitive actions and narrowly focused interests.
- **Asperger syndrome**, a mild form of autism. You may have good language skills, but have trouble being around others, and have unusual interests and behaviors.

What is the cause?

Childhood vaccines do not cause ASD.

The exact cause of ASD is not known.

- The brain makes chemicals that affect thoughts, emotions, and actions. Without the right balance of these chemicals, there may be problems with the way you think, feel, or act. A person with this disorder may have too little or too much of some of these chemicals.
- If a woman is infected with a virus, has diabetes, or does not eat healthy foods while she is pregnant, it increases the risk that the child will develop an autism spectrum disorder. Exposure to certain chemicals and medicines during pregnancy may also increase the risk. Low oxygen levels from long labor or premature birth may also increase the risk.
- ASDs sometimes run in families. There may be certain genes linked to autism. If the father is older than age 40 when the mother gets pregnant, it may increase a child's risk.
- People with ASD may have physical changes in their brain. These changes may mean that some parts of the brain are more active or less active than in other people.
- People with other brain problems and genetic syndromes such as fragile X syndrome, are sometimes also autistic.

ASD is more common in males than females.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms of ASD vary. No two people with ASD are exactly alike.

Social Skills

Most people with ASD seem to have a lot of trouble learning the give-and-take of dealing with people. You may have trouble making eye contact. You may find it hard to make small talk or deal with groups of people. You may take things very literally and not get jokes or double meanings. You may have trouble understanding other people's emotions. You may have little interest in others, have trouble making friends, or avoid dealing with people.

Communication Problems

There is a wide range of communication problems. You may not always understand tone of voice or nonverbal communication, such as a smile, a wink, or a frown. You may have a hard time starting conversations or keeping them going.

Repetitive Behaviors

People with ASD sometimes repeat movements. You may have strong habits and routines and get very upset at the slightest change in routine. You may have a very narrow range of interests and want things done a certain way and at certain times.

Other problems

You may be very focused on certain interests and objects. You may also be very sensitive to certain sounds, textures, tastes, and smells. You may also be completely insensitive to pain or temperature.

How is an ASD diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms, medical and family history, and any medicines you are taking. Your provider will check for a medical illness or drug or alcohol problem that could cause the symptoms. You may have tests or scans to check for other possible causes of the symptoms.

If your healthcare provider thinks you may have autism spectrum disorder, your provider may refer you to specialists such as a psychologist, psychiatrist, speech therapist, or neurologist. They can do more testing and advise you about treatment.

What is the treatment?

There is no one best treatment for everyone with ASD. Before you decide on treatment, find out what your options are. Learn as much as you can and make your choice for treatment based on your needs. The treatment of ASD may involve:

Therapy

- Social skills training to increase mental awareness, self-esteem, and confidence, and help you make more friends.
- Cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is a way to help you identify and change views you have of yourself, the world, and the future. CBT can make you aware of unhealthy ways of thinking. It can also help you learn new ways to think and act.

- Group therapy can help you deal with work and relationships. It takes place in a group of 6 to 10 people, under the guidance of a therapist.
- Family therapy is often very helpful. Family therapy treats all members of the family rather than working with one person alone. It helps the whole family to make changes.

Medicines

- Several kinds of medicines may help. Your healthcare provider will work with you to select the best medicine. You may need to take more than one type of medicine.

Natural Remedies and Alternative Treatments

- Exercising and learning ways to relax may help. Yoga and meditation may also be helpful. You may want to talk with your healthcare provider about using these methods along with medicines and therapy.
- Claims have been made that certain herbal and dietary products help control ASD symptoms. No herb or dietary supplement has been proven to consistently or completely relieve the symptoms of ASD. Supplements are not tested or standardized and may vary in strengths and effects. They may have side effects and are not always safe. Before you take any supplement, talk with your healthcare provider.

How can I take care of myself?

- Get support. Talk with family and friends. Join a support group in your area.
- Learn to manage stress. Ask for help at home and work when the load is too great to handle. Find ways to relax. For example, take up a hobby, listen to music, watch movies, or take walks. Try deep breathing exercises when you feel stressed.
- Take care of your physical health. Try to get at least 7 to 9 hours of sleep each night. Eat a variety of healthy foods. Limit caffeine. If you smoke, quit. Avoid alcohol and drugs. Stay physically active as advised by your provider.
- Check your medicines. To help prevent problems, tell your healthcare provider and pharmacist about all of the medicines, natural remedies, vitamins, and other supplements that you take. Take all medicines as directed by your provider or therapist. Talk to your provider if you have problems taking your medicine or if the medicines don't seem to be working.
- Contact your healthcare provider or therapist if you have any questions or your symptoms seem to be getting worse.

Get emergency care if you or a loved one has serious thoughts of suicide or self-harm, violence, or harming others.

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Developed by Change Healthcare.

Published by Change Healthcare.

Produced in Cork, Ireland.