

Autism spectrum disorders

What are autism spectrum disorders?

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. Autism is a neurological disorder that affects the functioning of the brain, autism impacts the normal development of the brain in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Children and adults with autism typically have difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. Autism is the most commonly known type of ASD, but there are others including pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and Asperger's Syndrome. The symptoms and characteristics of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations from gifted to severe. Although autism is defined by a certain set of behaviors, children and adults can exhibit any combination of the behaviors in any degree of severity.

What is the cause?

There is no known single cause for autism, but it is generally accepted that abnormalities in brain structure or function play a role. Researchers are investigating a number of theories, including the link between heredity, genetics, medical problems and physiological factors.

What are some signs?

Every person with autism is a unique individual. Symptoms may range from mild to severe and may change in the same child. People with ASDs may have delays with social, emotional and communication skills. A child with ASD may have difficulty with: "pretend" games, relating to others, eye contact, expressing their needs using typical words or motions, adapting to a change in routine, pointing or showing interest to objects or people, sensory issues. A child with autism may tend to prefer to be alone, repeat or echo words/phrases said to them (echolalia), do things in repetition, have an inappropriate attachment to or obsession with objects, avoid or seek auditory stimulation, process and respond to information in unique ways and may or may not have language. A child with autism may not be responsive to traditional teaching methods.

Online resources

Siskin Children's Institute • www.siskin.org

Autism Society of America • www.autism-society.org • 1-800-3-AUTISM

Autism Speaks • www.autismspeaks.org

Kids Quest • www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/kids/default.htm

National Institute of Mental Health • www.nimh.nih.gov/healthinformation/autismmenu.cfm

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder • www.familypathfinder.org

TRIAD • www.TRIADatvanderbilt.com • 615-936-1705

Talk Autism • www.talkAutism.com