

Autism



Autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder that impairs a person's communication, behavior and social skills. The signs of autism appear before age 3, although some developmental differences can be seen at 18 months or earlier. Some people with autism are mildly affected with good verbal skills and can be very knowledgeable about a favorite subject. Others are severely affected with odd-seeming behaviors or tics and little or no language. Because of this range in severity, autism is considered a "spectrum" disorder. The term "Autistic Spectrum Disorders" (ASD) covers those who are mildly affected, severely affected, or anywhere in between.

What causes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)?

In the United States, 1 in 88 children have ASD. No one knows exactly what causes ASD. However, we know that autism is a physical condition linked to abnormal biology and chemistry in the brain. Scientists believe there is a genetic component, and younger siblings of children with autism are at higher risk for the disorder. Environmental factors may also play a role, but this hasn't been proven. Studies show that neither immunizations nor parenting practices are a cause of ASD.

Signs of ASD in Infants and Toddlers

- Limited eye contact
- Impaired social interactions with less awareness of and responsiveness to others
- Doesn't smile
- Doesn't use finger pointing to communicate
- Becomes attached to unusual objects
- Does not respond to his/her name by age 1
- Does not play "pretend" games (e.g., pretend feeding a doll)
- Does not babble or make meaningful gestures by age 1
- Loss of language and/or social skills during the second year
- Does not combine two words by age 2
- Seems to be hearing impaired at times, although no evidence of a hearing problem is present
- Exhibits unusual repetitive behaviors like hand flapping, humming, or rocking
- Prefers to be alone

Signs of ASD in Pre-school Children

- Difficulty with change
- Does not imitate the behaviors of others
- Difficulty expressing and responding to emotion
- Repeats or echoes words and phrases
- Trouble understanding humor, idioms, and sayings
- Difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation with another child
- Laughs, cries, or shows distress for no apparent reason
- Uncontrollable tantrums
- May not want to cuddle or be cuddled
- Uneven gross and fine motor skills
- Plays oddly with toys; impaired imaginative play
- Over-sensitive or under-sensitive to pain or other stimulation
- No real fear of danger
- Limited interests and eating habits

What can I do if I think my child has autism?

If you have concerns about your child's behavior, language or social skills, talk to your child's health care provider. The health care provider will ask you questions and decide if a more thorough assessment is needed. Although there is no cure for autism, early intervention that focuses on communication and social skills is very helpful.

References and Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Autism Information Center, www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/dd/ddautism.htm.

Autism Speaks: Learn the Signs of Autism, <http://www.autismspeaks.org/>.

National Institute for Health, http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/upload/introduction_autism.pdf.

Autism Society of America, <http://www.autism-society.org/>.