

# Autism Spectrum Disorders



1919 University Avenue West, Suite 400, St. Paul, MN 55104 Tel. 651-645-2948 or 888-NAMIHELPS [www.namihelps.org](http://www.namihelps.org)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental condition that is very common. Those with ASD may have difficulties communicating or interacting with others. Most people are diagnosed in the first three years, although anyone can be diagnosed at any age. Many children who have ASD also have other conditions (such as bipolar disorder, social anxiety disorder, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder to name a few). Symptoms of ASD look different for every person.

## Who Develops ASD?

Some studies have shown that boys are more likely than girls to develop signs of ASD. However, anyone of any gender, race and socioeconomic status can experience ASD.

## Common Signs of ASD

Some signs of ASD may be obvious from birth, while in most cases signs of ASD become clearer as children get older. Every person experiences ASD in their own way and signs may be serious for each person. Children with ASD may display some of the following signs:

- Playing less with other children
- Difficulties making friends
- Has a hard time communicating
- Extreme interest or focus on specific things
- Repeating behaviors (such as walking in a certain way or eating the same meal every day)
- Repeating phrases or movements (such as hand flapping or twirling objects)
- Difficulty transitioning to new places or changes
- Speaking later than other peers
- Not making eye contact
- Overly sensitive or less sensitive to certain sensory experiences (such as specific sights, smells or sounds as well as feelings of being cold or in pain, etc.)
- Difficulty understanding small facial expressions (like a wink or a smile)
- Difficulties in explaining their emotions
- Difficulties sleeping
- Self-injuring behavior

## Causes

Scientists have not discovered a single cause of ASD. They believe several factors may contribute to this developmental disorder.

- **Family History.** There is some evidence that ASD can run in families.
- **Brain structure.** Those with ASD brains may look or have different amounts of chemicals than others.
- **Environment.** Such as factors that happen before being born, like the mother's health while pregnant.

## Diagnosis

Diagnosing ASD is often a two-step process.

First, a pediatrician will do a general development screening. This happens during well-child checkups.

Second, if a child shows some developmental difficulties, they are evaluated by a team. This team includes doctors and health professionals with a wide range of specialties. After, a child may be diagnosed as having ASD or another developmental disorder.

## **Treatment**

Since ASD looks different for everyone, there are many treatment plans that exist for ASD. Many therapists work closely with ASD children and adults, using a combination of many therapies. Treatment should be meet every person's needs as well as their families. Some possibilities are treatment are:

- Social skills training (which focuses on improving communication, social skills, and behavior management).
- Behavioral treatments, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA).
- Medication for co-occurring symptoms
- Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM), such as supplements and changes in diet
- Parent education and training
- Individual psychotherapy
- Family counseling may also be helpful for families of those with ASD.

Updated June 2020