

Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

An overview

Autism spectrum disorder is a condition related to brain development and that impacts how a person perceives and socialises with others. It causes problems in social interaction and communication. The term “spectrum” in autism spectrum disorder refers to the wide range of symptoms and severity.

Autism spectrum disorder begins in early childhood and eventually causes problems functioning in society whether that is socially, in school or at work. Children also often show symptoms of autism within the first year. However, a small number of children appear to develop normally in the first year but then tend to go through a period of regression between 18 and 24 months of age and start to develop autism symptoms.

The last thing to note is that there is no cure for autism spectrum disorder but early treatment throughout a long period of time can make a big difference in the lives of many children.



Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

Symptoms

Some of the signs that tend to show during early infancy are reduced eye contact, lack of response to their name or indifference to caregivers. Other children may develop normally for the first few months or years but then will suddenly become withdrawn or aggressive or lose some language skills that they may have already acquired. These signs are usually seen by the age of 2 years. Not all people with ASD will show all behaviours but most will show several.

Below are some common signs shown by people who have autism spectrum disorder:

Social Communication and interaction behaviours

- fails to respond to his or her name or appears to not hear you at times
- has poor eye contact
- lacks facial expression
- resists cuddling and holding, and prefers to play alone
- finds it difficult to start a conversation or keep one going
- may speak with a singsong voice or robot-like speech
- has difficulty to express their emotions or feelings
- has difficulty understanding other emotions and feelings
- may approach a social interaction by being passive, aggressive or disruptive



Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

Patterns of Behaviour

- performs repetitive movement such as rocking, spinning or hand flapping
- repeating words or phrases – this is called echolalia
- develops specific routine or rituals and becomes disturbed at the slightest change
- performs activities that could cause self-harm such as biting or head-banging
- overly focused and fascinated by details of an object but may not understand the overall purpose or function of the object
- being more or less sensitive than other people to sensory input, such as light, noise, clothing or temperature
- has specific food preferences such as eating only a few foods or refusing foods with a certain texture

As people with ASD mature some children may become more engaged with others and show fewer disturbances in behaviour. Usually those with the least severe problems can eventually lead normal or near-normal lives. However others may continue to have difficulty with language or social skills and the teen years can bring the worst emotional and behavioural problems.

Causes

While scientists don't exactly know what the causes of ASD are, research suggests that genes can act together with the influences from the environment to affect development in ways that lead to ASD.



Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

- **Genetics** – several different genes appear to be involved in autism spectrum disorder. For some children, ASD can be associated with a genetic disorder. For some other children genetic changes such as mutations may increase the risk of autism spectrum disorder. Other genes may also affect the brain development or the way the brain cells communicate, or they may determine the severity of symptoms. Some genetic mutations seem to be inherited whilst others may occur spontaneously.
- **Environmental factors** – factors may include viral infections, medications or complications during pregnancy or air pollutants play a role in triggering autism spectrum disorder.

Risk Factors

ASD affects children of all races and nationalities but certain factors increase a child's risk. These may include:

- **Having a sibling with ASD.**
- **Your child's sex** – boys are four times more likely to develop ASD than girls are.
- **Family history** – families who have one child with ASD have an increased risk of having another child with the disorder. It's also not uncommon for parents of relatives of a child with ASD to have minor problems themselves with social or communication skills.
- **Other disorders** – children with certain medical conditions will have a high risk of ASD or autism-like symptoms.
- **Preterm babies** – babies that are born before 26 weeks of gestation may have a greater risk of developing ASD.
- **Parents ages** – There is a correlation between children born to older parents are more likely to develop ASD.

Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

Diagnosis

Doctors tend to diagnose ASD by looking at a person's development and behaviour.

Young children

Stage 1 – General developmental screening during well-child check-ups

- Every child should receive well-child check-ups with a paediatrician or an early childhood health care provider.
- Parents experiences and concerns are very important in the screening process for young children.
- Children who showed developmental problems during this screening process will be referred for a second stage of evaluation.

Stage 2 – Additional evaluation

- The second evaluation tends to be with a team of doctors and other health professionals who are experienced in diagnosing ASD.
- The evaluation may assess:
 - Cognitive level or thinking skills
 - Language abilities
 - Age-appropriate skills needed to complete daily activities independently such as eating, dressing and toileting
 - Sometimes blood and hearing tests are done as well.



Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

Treatments and Therapies

Treatment for ASD should begin as soon as possible after the diagnosis. Early treatment for ASD is important as proper care can reduce individuals' difficulties whilst helping them learn new skills and make the most of their many strengths. There is no cure that exists for ASD but early intervention can help your child learn social, communication, functional and behavioural skills.

Some treatment options may include:

- **Behaviour and communication therapies** – programmes focus on reducing problem behaviours and teaching new skills.
- **Educational therapies** – programmes typically include a team of specialists and a variety of activities to improve social skills, communication and behaviour.
- **Family therapies** – parents and other family members can learn how to play and interact with their children in ways that promote social interaction skills, manage problem behaviours and teach daily living skills and communication.
- **Medication** – no medication can cure autism, but they are there to help control symptoms. Certain medications may be prescribed if your child is hyperactive; antipsychotic drugs are for more severe behavioural problems; antidepressants may be prescribed for anxiety.

Ordinary Magic

Autistic Spectrum Disorder

Fact Sheet and Top Tips

Coping and Support

Try and find a team of supported professionals

- Learn more about the disorder
- Take time to yourself and other family members
- Seek out other families of children with autism spectrum disorder
- Ask your doctor about new technologies and therapies

Read brochures and shareable resources such as:

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism-spectrum-disorder/index.shtml> - this provides information about symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of ASD

<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/education-awareness/shareable-resources-on-autism-spectrum-disorder.shtml> - this helps support ASD awareness and education in your community

