

Understanding autism spectrum disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder. It affects a person's behavior and makes communication and social interactions difficult.

ASD can range from mild to severe. The type of symptoms a person has and how severe they are varies. Some children may not be able to function without a lot of help from parents and other caregivers. Others may develop social and verbal skills and lead independent lives as adults.

Most people with ASD will always have some trouble communicating or interacting with others. But early diagnosis and treatment have helped more and more people who have ASD lead full lives and do things such as going to college and having a job.

ASD now includes conditions that used to be diagnosed separately. These include autism, Asperger's syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder. Any of these terms might still be used by you or your doctor to describe your condition.

What causes ASD?

The exact cause of ASD is not known.

False claims in the news have made some parents concerned about a link between ASD and vaccines. But studies have found no link between vaccines and ASD. It's important to make sure that your child gets all childhood vaccines. They help keep your child from getting serious diseases that can cause harm or even death.¹

What increases the risk of ASD?

ASD tends to run in families, so experts think it may be something that you inherit.

Scientists are trying to find out exactly which genes may be responsible for passing down ASD in families. ASD tends to occur more often in people who have certain genetic conditions. These may include fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis.

Some things increase the chance that you'll have a baby with ASD. These things are called risk factors.

The risk of having a baby with ASD is higher if either birth parent:

- Is at an older age.
- Has another child who has ASD.
- Has a family history of learning problems.

1. Taylor LE, et al. (2014). Vaccines are not associated with autism: An evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies. *Vaccines*, 32(29): 3623–3629.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually are noticed by the time a child is 2 years old. But if symptoms are severe, a parent may notice them as early as when a child is 12 months old.

In most cases, parents first notice that their toddler has not started talking yet and is not acting like other children the same age. Sometimes a child with ASD may start to talk at the same time as others the same age. But then they may stop gaining new skills or lose their social and language skills.

Symptoms of ASD include:

- A delay in learning to talk, or not talking at all. Or a child may not use or respond to gestures or pointing. A child may seem to be deaf, even though hearing tests are normal.
- Repeated and overused types of behavior, interests, and play. Examples include repeated body rocking, unusual attachments to objects, and getting very upset when routines change.

Behavior and symptoms can range from mild to severe. Parents often say that their child with ASD prefers to play alone and doesn't make eye contact with other people.

People with ASD may also have other problems, such as speech and language issues, sleep problems, and seizures. They may also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, or anxiety.

How is ASD diagnosed?

There is no single test to diagnose ASD. Diagnosing ASD involves a combination of screening questions, assessments, and evaluation of the way a child behaves and interacts with others.

As a parent, you know your child best and are their best advocate. If you are concerned, share your observations with your doctor. Your input could help your child get the help they need.

Screening questions are usually asked at the 18-month and 24-month well-child visits. But they may be asked sooner if you are concerned that your child may have signs of ASD. The questions cover how your child talks, moves and interacts with others. The answers help your doctor understand how your child is developing and if there are signs of a problem that might be related to ASD.

If your doctor thinks your child may have ASD, he or she may refer you to a specialist, such as a developmental pediatrician, child psychiatrist or psychologist, or neuropsychologist.

A specialist will ask about your child's health history and do a physical exam. A specialist will also:

- Ask about your child's behavior and interaction with others.
- Observe how your child interacts with others and behaves during play or while doing specific tasks.

This can help you know if your child has ASD or if he or she has a different problem, such as a language delay or ASD and another condition. Testing also helps identify how severe the symptoms are and what your child's strengths and weaknesses are. All of this can help your doctor decide on the best way to treat your child.

Want to learn more?

Visit www.healthwise.net/MagellanHealth and search for "autism."

Find more information and helpful resources at MagellanHealthcare.com/Autism-Resources.