

Autism Spectrum Disorders Fact Sheet

What are autism spectrum disorders?

Autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) are a group of developmental disabilities caused by a problem with the brain. Scientists do not know yet exactly what causes this problem. ASDs can impact a person's functioning at different levels, from very mildly to severely. There is usually nothing about how a person with an ASD looks that sets them apart from other people, but they may communicate, interact, behave, and learn in ways that are different from most people. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary – from gifted to severely challenged. Autistic disorder is the most commonly known type of ASD, but there are others, including “pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified” (PDD-NOS) and Asperger Syndrome.

What are some of the signs of ASDs?

People with ASDs may have problems with social, emotional, and communication skills. They might repeat certain behaviors and might not want change in their daily activities. Many people with ASDs also have different ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to things. ASDs begin during early childhood and last throughout a person's life.

A child or adult with an ASD might:

- not play “pretend” games (pretend to “feed” a doll)
- not point at objects to show interest (point at an airplane flying over)
- not look at objects when another person points at them
- have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all
- avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- prefer not to be held or cuddled or might cuddle only when they want to
- appear to be unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds
- be very interested in people, but not know how to talk, play, or relate to them
- repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language (echolalia)
- have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions
- repeat actions over and over again
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound
- lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were once using)

* Note: Contact your child's doctor or nurse if your child experiences a dramatic loss of skills at any age.

What can I do if I think my child has an ASD?

If you or your doctor think there could be a problem, ask for a referral to see a developmental pediatrician or other specialist, and you can contact your local early intervention agency (for children under 3) or public school (for children 3 and older). To find out who to speak to in your area, you can contact the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities by logging on to <http://www.nichcy.org/> or calling 1-800-695-0285. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has links to information for families on their Autism Information Center Web page (www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/resources/familyresources.htm).

Right now, the main research-based treatment for ASDs is intensive structured teaching of skills, often called behavioral intervention. It is very important to begin this intervention as early as possible in order to help your child reach his or her full potential. Acting early can make a real difference!