

# Autism Spectrum Disorder

## Uncovering Clues To A Complicated Condition



Autism is a complex brain disorder that first appears during early childhood. It affects how a person behaves and interacts with others. People with autism might not look you in the eye when talking. They may spend a lot of time lining up toys or other objects. Or they may say the same sentence over and over.

The disorder is so variable—affecting each person in very different ways—that it can be difficult to diagnose and treat. This variability is why autism is called a “spectrum” disorder. It spans the spectrum from mild to severe and includes a wide range of symptoms.

About 1 in 88 children may have autism spectrum disorder, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The number of affected children has been growing in recent years. Many researchers believe this increase is due to better diagnosis and awareness. Others suspect that yet-unknown factors may be partly to blame.

### What Causes Autism & How Is It Diagnosed?

Although the exact causes of autism are unclear, research suggests that both genes and the environment play important roles. Autism affects a child's development in different ways, and so it's known as a developmental disorder.

Parents are often the first to suspect that something may not be quite right with their child's development. They may notice their baby doesn't make eye contact, becomes overly focused on certain objects or isn't “babbling” like other children the same age.

There are no direct tests, like blood tests or brain scans that can identify autism. Instead, the condition is diagnosed by looking at a child's behaviors and development.

**CONTINUED**  
ON NEXT PAGE

(Continued from previous page)

In May 2013, the American Psychiatric Association updated an important book that's used to diagnose and classify mental disorders. *The DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edition)* includes an updated definition for autism spectrum disorder. The condition is now identified by looking for 2 broad categories of symptoms: problems with social communication and the presence of "stereotyped" behaviors, such as walking in certain patterns or insisting on specific or unusual routines. To be diagnosed with autism, these symptoms must arise during early childhood, even if they're not noticed until later, when social demands increase.

### How Is It Treated?

Research has shown that therapies focusing on behavior and communication can be helpful. Some drugs can also reduce certain related symptoms, but no medications have been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration specifically for treating the main symptoms of autism.

Scientists are also looking for ways to predict likely outcomes for children with autism. One National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded team found that the brain waves of some 2-year-olds with autism can have a distinctive pattern when they listen to familiar words. The children with

more severe social symptoms didn't have a typical focused response in the brain region that processes language. Follow-up studies showed that these brain responses predicted the children's developmental abilities 2 and 4 years later.

While research is ongoing, it's clear that early diagnosis and treatment can improve outcomes for those with autism. If you're concerned about your child's social communication and behaviors, don't wait. Talk with your child's doctor. You may be referred to a specialist who can do a thorough evaluation. The earlier autism is diagnosed, the sooner specific therapy can begin.

## Signs of Autism

Children with autism may:

- Have problems with normal back-and-forth conversation.
- Lack interest in other children or have trouble sharing in imaginative play.
- Avoid eye contact.
- Miss social cues, such as facial expressions and gestures.
- Repeat words or movements.
- Excessively line up or flip over objects such as toys, or have an intense attachment to objects.
- Insist on familiar routines.
- React strongly (or under-react) to the way things smell, taste, look, feel or sound.

The CDC recommends that children be screened for developmental delays and disabilities during regular doctor visits at 9, 18, and 24 or 30 months, with screening for autism at 18 and 24 months.

