



Understanding autism

Autism is a spectrum of developmental disorders that impacts how a person learns, communicates, behaves, and interacts socially. While boys are more likely to be affected, autism spectrum disorders (ASD) can develop in people of all ages, races, and ethnicities.

Health professionals believe ASD is caused by a mix of genetic and environmental factors. Autism presents differently in each individual and ranges from very mild to requiring extensive support.



SIGNS OF ASD

Screening is a routine part of well-child visits during the first few years of life. However, those with only mild impairments from ASD may remain undiagnosed until later in life. Signs include:

- Poor eye contact
- No babbling or pointing before age 1
- Not responding appropriately to name
- Poor social responsiveness
- Preferring to play alone
- Repetitive movements such as hand-flapping
- Delays in skill development
- Loss of previously acquired skills
- Preoccupation with certain objects or subjects
- Inflexible adherence to routine

DIAGNOSING ASD

There is no blood test or other medical diagnostic test. A doctor makes the diagnosis based on observation of the child's behavior and developmental history.

Screening tools a physician may use include:

- Developmental screening
- Developmental monitoring
- Comprehensive developmental evaluations

If a child has additional risk factors for autism, your doctor may recommend additional screenings. Risk factors include:

- Preterm delivery
- Low birth weight
- Lead exposure
- Sibling with ASD
- Other factors

TREATMENT FOR ASD

There is no cure for ASD. However, treatment can significantly improve symptoms. Many people with autism benefit from a combination of therapies that help them develop language and social skills and encourage positive behaviors. Common treatment includes:

- Speech therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Educational interventions
- Intensive behavioral interventions
- Family counseling
- Skill-oriented training
- Medication
- Physical therapy
- Cognitive behavior therapy
- Nutritional therapy