



Information Sheet:

What is Autism?

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is described as a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first 2 years of life.

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, a guide created by the American Psychiatric Association that health care providers use to diagnose mental disorders, people with ASD often have:

- Difficulty with communication and interaction with other people
- Restricted interests and repetitive behaviors
- Symptoms that affect their ability to function in school, work, and other areas of life

Autism is known as a “spectrum” disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience.

There is no known single cause of autism, scientists believe ASD is likely caused by a combination of autism risk genes and environmental factors influencing early brain development.

Common Signs of ASD:

This list gives some examples of common types of behaviors in people diagnosed with ASD. Not all people with ASD will have all behaviors.

Basic **social interaction** can be difficult for individuals with autism. This may include:

- ❖ Lack of interest in other people or in sharing interests or achievements (e.g. *showing you a drawing, pointing to a bird*).
- ❖ Unusual body language, gestures, and facial expressions (e.g. *avoiding eye contact or using facial expressions that don't match what he or she is saying*).

- ❖ Unlikely to approach others or to pursue social interaction; comes across as aloof and detached; prefers to be alone. Or socially awkward; misses social cues.
- ❖ Difficulty understanding other people's feelings, reactions, and nonverbal cues.
- ❖ Difficulty or failure to make friends with others the same age.

Problems with **speech, social communication, pragmatics, and language comprehension**. This may include:

- ❖ Delay in learning how to speak or doesn't talk at all.
- ❖ Speaking in an abnormal tone of voice, or with an odd rhythm or pitch.
- ❖ Repeating words or phrases over and over without communicative intent.
- ❖ Trouble starting a conversation or keeping it going.
- ❖ Difficulty communicating needs or desires.
- ❖ Doesn't understand simple statements or questions.
- ❖ Taking what is said too literally, missing humor, irony, and sarcasm.

Restricted interests, rigid/repetitive behaviors, or obsessive activities and interests. This may include:

- ❖ Repetitive body movements (*hand flapping, rocking, spinning, pacing*); moving constantly.
- ❖ Obsessive attachment to unusual objects (*rubber bands, keys, light switches*).
- ❖ Preoccupation with a specific topic of interest, often involving numbers or symbols (*maps, license plates, sports statistics*).
- ❖ A strong need for sameness, order, and routines (e.g. *lines up objects, follows a rigid schedule, rituals*).
- ❖ Gets upset by change in routine or environment.
- ❖ Fascinated by spinning objects, moving pieces, or parts of objects (e.g. *spinning the wheels on a car, opening/closing, pushing buttons, in/out*).