



Autism Spectrum Disorders

What Everyone Needs to Know

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are ...

... a group of pervasive developmental disabilities that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges. People with ASDs handle information in their brains differently than other people. The term “autism spectrum” means that these disorders affect each person to different degrees. The symptoms can range from very mild to severe, and the ability of individuals with ASDs to think and learn can range from gifted to severely challenged. The severity and expression of the symptoms can differ among individuals.

... an urgent public health concern. Incidence of ASDs among the US population has increased tremendously in the last decade. Currently, the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that an average of one in every 110 children in the United States has an ASD – that’s higher than the rate of childhood cancer, diabetes and AIDS combined. More people than ever before are being diagnosed with an ASD. While greater awareness and a broader definition of ASDs may contribute to this increase in diagnoses, studies indicate a true increase in the number of people with an ASD cannot be ruled out.

ASDs develop before the age of three, but are sometimes not apparent until later. They remain throughout a person’s life. To date there is no known cure for ASDs, although early intervention treatment has been shown to greatly improve a child’s development. Some ASDs can be diagnosed as early as 18 months of age, however, many children do not receive a final diagnosis until much older. Delaying diagnosis means a child may miss the opportunity to get help early.

Many people with an ASD require supports and services to develop the skills they need to live successful, happy lives. Recent studies have estimated that the lifetime cost to care for one individual with an ASD is approximately \$3.2 million. The Centers for Disease Prevention and Control reports that average medical expenditures for individuals with ASDs have been found to be higher than that of individuals without an ASD. The challenges involved in caring for a family member diagnosed with an ASD can be stressful for parents, siblings and caregivers and have widespread repercussions.

ASD Signs and Symptoms

There is no medical test to detect ASDs. Doctors must look at a person’s behavior and development to make the diagnosis. A person with an ASD might:

- Not respond to their name by 12 months
- Not point at objects to show interest by 14 months
- Not play “pretend” games (e.g. pretend to feed a doll) by 18 months

- Avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- Have trouble understanding others' feelings
- Have delayed speech and language skills
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (echolalia)
- Give unrelated answers to questions
- Appear to be unaware when other people talk to them, but respond to other sounds
- Get upset by minor changes
- Have obsessive interests
- Flap their hands, rock their body, or spin in circles
- Have unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look or feel
- Repeat actions over and over again
- Lose skills they once had (e.g. stop saying words they were using)
- Have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions

What can you do?

If someone you know shows signs of ASD, don't wait. There are things you can do:

- If it's your own child, talk with your child's doctor. Ask for a referral to a developmental pediatrician, a child neurologist, or a child psychologist or psychiatrist who can evaluate your child.
- If it is someone else's child, share the signs of ASDs with the child's caregivers and encourage them to have the child evaluated.
- If the child is under age three, contact the New York State Early Intervention Program and request an evaluation: (518) 473-7016.
- If the child is between ages 3-22, contact your local public school district and request an evaluation.

For More Information

For information about ASDs and New York State supports and services for individuals of any age with ASDs, visit New York State's Initiative for Adults and Children on the Autism Spectrum (www.nyacts.com).

For help finding out who to speak to in your local area, contact the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (1-800-695-0285 or www.nichcy.org).

For more information about child development and the warning signs of ASDs, access the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's "Detect Autism Tools" (<http://www.cdc.gov/Features/DetectAutismTools/>) and its "Learn the Signs. Act Early" campaign (1-800-CDC-INFO or www.cdc.gov/actearly).

**Autism Spectrum Disorders are increasing.
Acting early can make a real difference.**

Sources: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, www.cdc.gov
Easter Seals' "Living with Autism" Study, 2008
Michael L. Ganzer, "The Lifetime Distribution of the Incremental Societal Costs of Autism," *Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine* 2007, 161 (4):343-349.