

What is Autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) affects the brain, impacting how people think, communicate, and experience the world. Autism exists on a spectrum because symptoms and support needs vary a lot. They're different for everyone. The cause isn't fully known, but genetics and environment may both play a role. Signs of autism often appear before age three, though a diagnosis often comes later.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

How common is autism?

Diagnoses have increased over the last few decades, likely due to better awareness and testing.

For Parents and Caregivers: What should I do if I think my child has autism?

Talk to a medical provider. You know your child best. Not all doctors understand autism or neurodiversity (a catch-all term for variations in how human brains are wired), so don't hesitate to ask questions or get a second opinion. Developmental pediatricians and child psychologists can do a formal evaluation. Waitlists can be long, so schedule as soon as you can.

For Youth: What if I think I might be autistic?

Some autistic people feel overwhelmed or uneasy but use masking – hiding true feelings or thoughts – to fit in. If you think you might be autistic, talk to a parent, doctor, or other adult you trust. Support can make a difference, even without a diagnosis.

What can I do NOW?

A diagnosis isn't required to get help. Children under three with a developmental delay may qualify for free Early Intervention services. Schools cannot (and should not) diagnose, but can support students aged three and up. Contact your district's special education office to learn more. Common therapies include:

- **Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA):** Teaches skills and behavior. (Some find it helpful, but others feel it forces autistic people to conform. There is nothing wrong with being autistic!)
- **Speech therapy:** Helps with communicating and understanding others.
- **Occupational therapy:** Teaches daily life skills.

What services are available for autistic children with higher support needs?

Home and community-based services are available. New York State's Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD) offers children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) a comprehensive range of services throughout their lives.

What other conditions sometimes occur with autism?

Conditions that may occur along with autism include: anxiety, depression, ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder), epilepsy, gastrointestinal disorders, and immune disorders.

Talking with a Medical Provider

When talking with medical professionals, you might want to share:

- Any observations and concerns – your own and from others – about your child’s development
- How behavior differs from peers
- Home videos of everyday behavior

What You Can Do at Home

Strategies used to support autistic people are useful for all of us! Some ideas:

- **Build a structured routine:** Schedules and predictability can reduce stress.
- **Use simple language:** Less is more. Instead of “Please pick up your coat and hang it over there,” try “Please hang up your coat.”
- **Socialize:** Look for shared interests. Encourage taking turns in games and conversations.
- **Focus on positives:** Praise what’s going well. Notice and comment. For example, say “Thank you for sharing!” or “I love how kind and gentle you are with Paws!”

Getting help and learning about autism is a journey. You’re not alone!

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About This Series

This series of handouts on health conditions was written by clinicians in Weill Cornell Medicine’s Pediatric Mental Health Integration Program, partners in the ACT for Youth CYSHCN Program Center of Excellence at Cornell University.

