



Autism Society Canada
Société canadienne de l'autisme

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

1. What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), also referred to as autism, is a neurological disorder which causes developmental disability. Autism affects the way the brain functions, resulting in difficulties with communication and social interaction, and unusual patterns of behaviour, activities and interests.

The term "spectrum" refers to a continuum of severity or developmental impairment. Children and adults with ASDs usually have particular communication, social and behavioural characteristics in common, but the conditions cover a wide spectrum, with individual differences in:

- Number and kinds of symptoms
- Severity: mild to severe
- Age of onset
- Levels of functioning
- Challenges with social interactions

There are five Autism Spectrum Disorders described under the diagnostic category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD).

Three of the most common PDDs are:

- Autistic Disorder, also called autism or classic autism or AD
- PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder - Not Otherwise Specified)
- Asperger's Disorder, also called AS, Asperger's Syndrome and Asperger Syndrome.

Autistic Disorder usually appears during the first three years of life and is four times more common in boys than girls. Asperger Syndrome is often diagnosed later, once a child reaches school age.

It is estimated, that one in every 165 children is born with an ASD. There are approximately 200,000

Canadians living with an ASD. This figure does not account for the numerous family members and caregivers whose lives are affected by autism. Autism is not related to race, ethnicity, family income, lifestyle or parenting. There is no standard "type" or "typical" person with an Autism Spectrum Disorder.

2. What are some of the characteristics of ASDs?

People with ASDs develop differently from others in the areas of motor, language, cognitive and social skills. Each person with an ASD is unique and will have different abilities.

Disabilities caused by ASDs might be very mild in one person and quite severe in another. Here are some examples of common types of characteristics and behaviours in a child or adult with an ASD:

- **Difficulty with Social Skills:** Some people with ASDs show no interest in other people. Others might be interested but not know how to talk, play with, or relate to others. Initiating and maintaining a conversation is usually difficult for people with ASDs.
- **Problems with Communication:** Speech and language skills may begin to develop and then be lost, or they may develop very slowly, or they may never develop. Without appropriate intensive early intervention about 40% of children with ASDs do not talk at all. People with ASDs are often unable to interpret non-verbal communication such as social distance cues, or the

use of gestures and facial cues that most of us take for granted.

- **Repeated Behaviours and Restricted Interests**

People with ASDs may have repeated ritualistic actions such as spinning, repeated rocking, staring, finger flapping, hitting self, etc. They may also have very restricted interests, talking about or focusing obsessively on only one thing, idea, or activity. Their habits may seem odd to others. Small changes in the environment or in daily routines that most people can manage might trigger acute distress.

- **Unusual Responses to Sensations**

People with ASDs may have both auditory and visual processing problems. Sensory problems vary in autism, from mild to severe with over and under-sensitivities.

- **Unique Abilities**

Some people with an ASD have an accurate and detailed memory for information and facts, high visual recall and a superb ability to manipulate data for useful purposes. They may be able to concentrate for long periods of time on particular tasks or subjects and be far more attentive to details than most of us.

3. How are ASDs diagnosed?

ASDs are diagnosed using a number of different measures and screening tools, based on observation of specific behaviours and disabilities by a multidisciplinary team of professionals trained in autism diagnosis. Early identification greatly improves the chances of establishing appropriate

educational supports and any necessary treatments and interventions.

4. What causes ASDs?

The cause or causes of ASDs are still unknown. Classic Autism was first recognized in 1942 by Dr. Leo Kanner at John's Hopkins Hospital. At nearly the same time, psychologist, Hans Asperger, described a similar group of patients. ASD has been recognized as a medical disorder only in modern times, but there are many historical accounts indicating that autism existed long before the 20th century.

It is generally accepted that ASD is a neurological disorder. Parenting styles do not cause children to have ASDs. Today research around the world focuses on possible causes such as genetics, differences in biological brain function, pre- and post-natal brain development, environmental factors, viral infections and immune responses and deficiencies. Many possible causes are being investigated.

5. Do all people with autism need treatment?

The term "autism" is frequently used as a catch-all term for a wide variety of symptoms, disabilities and special abilities. There are people with Asperger Syndrome, "high functioning" autism and PDD-NOS who may enjoy a very high level of functioning and who may need little or no special treatment or educational programming.

In contrast there are many families who have children with seriously debilitating autism conditions who suffer deeply from a myriad of communication, behavioural, sensory and physical symptoms - children who will never reach their full potential without intensive support, special educational programming and effective evidence-based treatment and services.

ASC believes that early scientifically validated effective treatment can lead to great improvement for many children with autism. Without appropriate individualized treatment and services many people with autism will not develop effective communication and social skills and will continue to

experience serious behaviour and learning difficulties.

6. What kinds of interventions, treatments and supports are available?

At ASC we do not believe that any one single treatment, intervention or program will benefit **all** people with an ASD. We do support professional ABA/EIBI-based treatments and educational approaches because these are based on scientifically validated research and have been shown to be effective for many people.

In order to choose the right treatment, intervention and other supports for children and adults with ASDs, (from early childhood onward) people with ASDs, parents, families and service providers will need to become well informed about the resources and services that are available.

Careful ongoing assessment of the needs and individual strengths and weaknesses of the person affected by ASD will be key. The availability and accessibility of treatments and services will also be critical.

[Detailed information on specific treatment and intervention.](#)

7. I am person with an ASD. Where do I find information and support?

Like other Canadians with disabilities, people with autism conditions are becoming more organized and are speaking out about their lives and their rights as disabled individuals.

There are an increasing number of support groups run by and for adults with autism, both on-line and in support group settings.

ASC has provincial and territorial member societies across the country. Our member societies provide direct support to individuals with ASDs. For a list of our member societies and links to support groups please visit our website: <http://autismsocietycanada.ca>

8. How do I find support as a parent or caregiver?

ASC's member societies also provide direct support to families and caregivers of people with ASD. Many of these societies have local chapters and can connect you to other families in your region and give you contact information about local and provincial resources that are available to assist you, your child and your family. For links to our member societies and to family resources please visit: <http://autismsocietycanada.ca> and [Autism Junction](#)

9. What is Autism Society Canada (ASC)?

ASC is a national incorporated non-profit charitable organization. It was founded in 1976 and is committed to advocacy, public education, information and referral, and support for its regional societies. ASC is a federation of Canada-wide provincial and territorial autism societies or their equivalent. These societies and their member groups in each region provide direct support to people with ASDs and their families. By linking its member societies across the country, ASC represents a large collective voice of the autism community in Canada. Our goals are to:

- Increase awareness and understanding of ASDs and acceptance and participation of individuals with ASDs;
- Promote federal policies, programs, and legislation that respond to the needs of the Autism community; and,
- Promote evidence-based services/treatment, best practices and standards.

For more detailed information about autism and ASC please visit our website at:
<http://www.autismsocietycanada.ca>

Or contact:
richard@autismsocietycanada.ca

Box 22017, 1670 Heron Rd.,
Ottawa ON K1V 0C2
T 613-789-8943, F 613-789-6985