

What is autism?

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), or autism, is a broad term used to describe a group of neurodevelopmental conditions.

These conditions are characterized by differences in communication and social interaction. People with ASD often demonstrate restricted and repetitive interests or patterns of behavior.

ASD is found in people around the world, regardless of race and ethnicity, culture, or economic background.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), ASD is diagnosed more often in boys than in girls. A study of 8-year-olds in 11 locations throughout the United States found a [4.3-to-1, boy-to-girl ratio](#)^{Trusted Source} in 2016. About 1 in 54 of the study participants had ASD.

There are indications that instances of autism are on the rise. Some attribute this increase to environmental factors. However, experts debate whether there's an actual increase in cases or just more frequent diagnoses. [Compare autism rates in different U.S. states.](#)

What are the symptoms of autism?

Symptoms of ASD typically become clearly evident during early childhood, between ages 12 and 24 months. However, symptoms may also appear [earlier](#) or [later](#).

Early symptoms may include a marked delay in [language](#) or social development.

The DSM-5 divides symptoms of ASD into two categories:

- problems with communication and social interaction
- restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior or activities

To be diagnosed with autism, a person must experience symptoms in both of these categories.

Problems with communication and social interaction

ASD can involve a range of issues with [communication](#), many of which appear before age 5.

Here's a general timeline of what this might look like:

- **From birth:** trouble maintaining eye contact
- **By 9 months:** not responding to their name
- **By 9 months:** not displaying facial expressions reflective of their emotions (like surprise or anger)
- **By 12 months:** not engaging in basic interactive games, like peek-a-boo or pat-a-cake
- **By 12 months:** not using (or only using a few) hand gestures, like hand-waving
- **By 15 months:** not sharing their interests with others (by showing someone a favorite toy, for example)

- **By 18 months:** not pointing or looking where others point
- **By 24 months:** not noticing when others appear sad or hurt
- **By 30 months:** not engaging in “pretend play,” like caring for a baby doll or playing with figurines
- **By 60 months of age:** not playing turn-taking games, like duck-duck goose

Additionally, autistic children might have trouble expressing their feelings or understanding those of others starting at 36 months.

As they age, they might have difficulty talking or very limited speaking skills. Other autistic children might develop language skills at an uneven pace. If there’s a particular topic that’s very interesting to them, for example, they might develop a very strong vocabulary for talking about that one topic. But they might have difficulty communicating about other things.

As autistic children begin talking, they might also talk in an unusual tone that can range from high-pitched and “sing-songy” to robotic or flat.

They might also show signs of [hyperlexia](#), which involves reading beyond what’s expected of their age. Children on the autism spectrum might learn to read earlier than their neurotypical peers, sometimes as early as age 2. But they tend to not comprehend what they’re reading.

While hyperlexia does not always accompany autism, [research](#) suggests nearly 84 percent of children with hyperlexia are on the spectrum.

As they interact with others, autistic children might have difficulty sharing their emotions and interests with others or find it hard to maintain back-and-forth conversation. Nonverbal communication, like maintaining eye contact or [body language](#), might also remain difficult.

These challenges with communication can persist throughout adulthood.

Restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior or activities

In addition to the communication and social issues mentioned above, autism also includes symptoms related to body movements and behaviors.

These can include:

- repetitive movements, like rocking, flapping their arms, spinning, or running back and forth
- lining objects, like toys, up in strict order and getting upset when that order is disturbed
- attachment to strict routines, like those around bedtime or getting to school
- [repeating](#) words or phrases they hear someone say over and over again
- getting upset over minor changes
- focusing intently on parts of objects, like the wheel of a toy truck or the hair of a doll
- unusual reactions to sensory input, like sounds, smells, and tastes
- obsessive interests
- exceptional abilities, like musical talent or memory capabilities

Other characteristics

Some autistic people might experience additional symptoms, including:

- delayed movement, language, or cognitive skills
- seizures
- gastrointestinal symptoms, like constipation or diarrhea
- excessive worry or stress
- unusual levels of fear (either higher or lower than expected)
- [hyperactive, inattentive, or impulsive behaviors](#)
- unexpected emotional reactions
- unusual eating habits or preferences
- unusual sleep patterns

What is stimming?

“Stimming” is a term used to describe self-stimulating behaviors, often involving repetitive motions or speech.

For example, someone might clap their hands, rub an object, or repeat a phrase. It’s typically associated with autistic people, but nearly everyone does some form of stimming, whether that’s rubbing their hands together or biting their nails.

For autistic people, stimming can sometimes get in the way of daily life or cause physical harm. But it can also serve as a helpful coping mechanism for dealing with [sensory overload](#) or navigating uncomfortable situations, among other things.