

Autism—the Basics

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What is Autism?

Autism is a neurological difference that impacts how an individual interacts with the world around them. It is characterized by differences in social interaction, communication, and behavior. Autism is defined by a spectrum because every autistic person is different, with a different range of skills, strengths, and needs.

What are some Signs/Symptoms of Autism?

Although autistic people experience autism differently, some characteristics are common.

Social Interaction/Communication

- Non-verbal communication, meaning some autistic people do not communicate using their voice. However, they can communicate in other ways, such as pointing to pictures or using an Augmentative or Alternative Communication (AAC) device.
- Echolalia or scripted speech
- Uncomfortable with eye contact
- Facial expressions and body language that is different from non-autistic people
- May struggle to interpret facial expressions (even though they care how others feel)

Feeling, Moving, and Thinking

- Differences in sensory perception and integration; may be sensitive to light, sounds, textures, etc.
- Uses stimming behavior, such as hand flapping or pacing, to regulate senses and reduce stress.
- Strong interests in one topic and attention to detail
- Difficulty with organizing, planning, and making decisions (executive functioning skills)
- May become overwhelmed with surprises and unexpected changes; prefers routine
- Difficulty coordinating motor movement

Who is Autistic?

According to the Center for Disease Control, around one in every fifty-four people is identified as autistic, more boys than girls.

When?

People are autistic from birth and may present with autistic characteristics in infancy. Some autistic people show autistic characteristics as toddlers.

Where?

Autistic people can be any race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic class.

Why?

There is no known cause or “cure” for autism. Many experts believe the autistic people have differences in the brain’s structure and function.

How can I support an Autistic Person?

Different professionals, such as a physician, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist, and/or psychologist can recommend strategies, supports, accommodations, and therapies to help an autistic person in everyday life. These professionals, along with the autistic person and caregivers, can work together to develop goals. According to the Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN), therapies

should focus less making an individual "less autistic" or "normal" and more on fostering self-advocacy and helping autistic people navigate with world.