

Autism Spectrum Disorder Tip Sheet

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a spectrum disorder that affects brain development. “Spectrum” means there are several symptoms. Every person affected will display them differently and may need varying levels of support; however they will demonstrate difficulty in two areas; social communication, and restricted and repetitive behaviour. Some examples are:

- Poor eye contact
- Repetitive body movements e.g. rocking, spinning, hand flapping
- Difficulty with transitions
- Sensitivities to sights, sounds, scents, textures and tastes in the environment
- Does not show or share items or interests
- Unusual attachment to or use of toys/ objects
- Appears to stare at or looks at items for long period of time, from different angles
- Insists on routines
- Inconsistent responding to name
- Plays with toys in an unusual way
- May not respond to attempts to play
- Limited speech

Who does it affect?

Autism Spectrum Disorder occurs early in development and affects approximately 1 in 68. (Centre for Disease Control, 2014) It affects more boys than girls.

What causes Autism Spectrum Disorder?

As a spectrum disorder, there is no “one cause”. Some environmental factors include advanced parental age, low birth weight, and exposure to valproate during pregnancy (can be found in anti-seizure medication). (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th ed., 2013) About 15% can be linked to genetic conditions such as Fragile X or Tuberous Sclerosis. There is also an increased likelihood that a sibling of a child with ASD will also be diagnosed. Multiple studies show there is no link between the MMR vaccination and Autism Spectrum Disorder. (Taylor, Swerdfeger, Eslick, 2014.)

Common issues:

Approximately 39% of people with ASD may have seizure disorders, which may require medication. They may have gastrointestinal issues associated with food sensitivities or allergies, or related to restricted diets. Sleep disorders are also common, which may include difficulties with sleep apnea, falling asleep, and/ or staying asleep.

DSM-5 Autism Spectrum Disorder

CORE DEFICITS

Social Communication

- Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity
- Deficits in non-verbal communicative behaviours used for social interaction
- Deficits in developing, maintaining and understanding relationships

Repetitive/Restrictive Behaviour

- Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech
- Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behaviour
- Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus
- Hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment

LEVELS OF SEVERITY

Level 1: Requiring support

Level 2: Requiring substantial support

Level 3: Requiring very substantial support

Level 1: Requiring support

Level 2: Requiring substantial support

Level 3: Requiring very substantial support

SPECIFIERS

With/without accompanying intellectual impairment:

- i.e. Cognitive skills

With/without accompanying language impairment:

- i.e. What type of speech is used

Associated with a known medical or genetic condition or environmental factor:

- e.g. Fragile X, epilepsy, FAS etc.

Associated with another neurodevelopmental, mental, or behavioural disorder

- e.g. ADHD, sleep disorders, depressive disorders

With catatonia

- i.e. psychomotor disturbances such as decreased motor activity or excessive and peculiar motor movements

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed.). (2013). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing.

Taylor, L. E., Swerdfeger, A. L., & Eslick, G. D. (2014). Vaccines are not associated with autism: an evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies.

Vaccine, 32(29), 3623-3629.