

Autism Fact Sheet

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), is a complex developmental condition that involves persistent challenges in social interaction, speech and nonverbal communication, and restricted/repetitive behaviors.

The effects of autism and the severity of symptoms can vary widely among individuals, which is why it is referred to as a "spectrum" disorder. Severity is based on social communication impairments and restricted repetitive behavior patterns.

For either criterion, severity is described in 3 levels: Level 3 – requires very substantial support, Level 2 – Requires substantial support, and Level 1 – requires support.

Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period and cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning. These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability or global developmental delay.

Key facts

- Autism, also known as autism spectrum disorder, encompasses a range of conditions affecting brain development.
- Approximately 1 in 100 children is diagnosed with autism.
- Although traits may surface in early childhood, autism is often identified later on.
- The capabilities and requirements of individuals with autism are diverse and may change over time. While some can lead independent lives, others face significant challenges and need lifelong care.
- Evidence-based psychosocial interventions can enhance communication and social abilities, positively influencing the well-being of autistic individuals and their caregivers.
- Support for those with autism should be complemented by community and societal efforts to enhance accessibility, inclusivity, and assistance.

Epidemiology

Autism affects an estimated 1 in 59 children, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), making it one of the most prevalent developmental disorders. It is four times more common in boys than in girls.

The number of people diagnosed with autism has risen significantly over the past two decades, but this may be due to better diagnostic tools and increased awareness of the disorder.

Signs and symptoms

The most apparent sign of autism is difficulty with social interaction. Children on the spectrum may struggle to understand and use facial expressions, body language, and tone of voice in communication. They may also have difficulty making friends and engaging in imaginative play.

Sensory issues are also common, as individuals with autism may be oversensitive or undersensitive to certain sights, sounds, textures, tastes, or smells. This can lead to extreme reactions and difficulty processing their surroundings (Hodges et al., 2020).

In addition, repetitive behaviors and restricted interests are hallmarks of autism. This may manifest as hand flapping, spinning objects, rigid routines, and fixations on specific topics or objects.

Causes

The exact cause of autism is still unknown, but research suggests a combination of genetic and environmental factors may play a role. Some factors that are associated with an increased likelihood of developing ASD include:

- Having a sibling with ASD
- Having older parents
- Having certain genetic conditions (such as Down syndrome or Fragile X syndrome)
- Having a very low birth weight

Co-occurring conditions

Autism often co-occurs with other conditions, which can complicate diagnosis and treatment. Some of the most common comorbidities include:

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

ADHD is marked by inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. Around 30% to 50% of individuals with ASD also experience ADHD (Hours et al., 2022), making it challenging for those with autism to focus and participate in structured activities.

Anxiety disorders

Anxiety disorders, like social anxiety and generalized anxiety disorder, are common in individuals with autism. Up to 40% of those with ASD experience significant leading to challenges in social interactions, irrational fears, and obsessive thoughts or behaviors.

Childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD)

CDD, also known as Heller's syndrome, is a rare condition considered within pervasive developmental disorders. In CDD, a child develops normally before suddenly showing severe losses in social, communicative, and behavioral skills. Unlike autistic disorder, CDD is characterized by the timing and pattern of symptom onset.

Other Intellectual disabilities

Intellectual disabilities, which vary in severity, often accompany autism, influencing a child's development and skill acquisition. These challenges can greatly affect daily functioning and quality of life. Health professionals, such as child psychologists and psychiatrists, distinguish between autism and other disabilities to provide tailored support and interventions.

Diagnosis

Autism can typically be diagnosed by age two, although some children may not be diagnosed until later in life. It is important to seek a diagnosis as early as possible so that appropriate interventions and therapies can be put in place.

Diagnosis usually involves a combination of standardized assessments, observation of behavior, and interviews with caregivers.

It is also important for the diagnostic process to consider any other developmental or medical conditions that may be present, as well as the individual's overall functioning and level of support needed.

Treatment

There is no known cure for autism, but early interventions can improve outcomes and quality of life.

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) has been shown to be effective in teaching social skills, communication, and daily living skills to individuals with autism. Other behavioral therapies may also be used, such as cognitive behavioral therapy and occupational therapy.

In addition to therapies, medications may also be prescribed to manage symptoms of autism. These may include antipsychotics for aggressive behaviors, stimulants for hyperactivity, or antidepressants for anxiety and depression.

Support

Individuals with autism may require varying levels of support throughout their lives.

This can range from special education in schools to vocational training and job placement to living independently with support from caregivers or in a supervised group setting.

Families and caregivers of individuals with autism may also benefit from support groups and resources to help manage the challenges of caring for someone with autism.

Human rights

Just like individuals with any disability, those with autism deserve equal opportunities to access education, employment, and participate in the community. Society should actively advocate for acceptance and inclusion of individuals with autism, ensuring they receive the essential accommodations that cater to their unique abilities and needs.

People with autism should also have the right to make decisions about their own lives and be treated with respect and dignity.

Efforts should be made to reduce the stigma surrounding autism, promoting understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity.

Resources

To learn more about autism and the support available, here are some helpful resources:

- [Autism Research Institute](#): provides information on autism research and interventions.
- [Autism Society](#): offers support groups, resources, and advocacy for families and individuals with autism.
- [Autistic Self Advocacy Network](#): a non-profit organization run by and for autistic people, advocating for acceptance and inclusion of individuals with autism.

- [Sesame Street and Autism](#): offers videos, stories, and activities for children on the autism spectrum.
- [National Autism Association](#): provides resources and support for families of individuals with autism.

References

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