

What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) affects an individual's ability and understanding of how to interact and communicate socially with others. They may also engage in repetitive behaviours and have difficulty coping with changes to routines or activities.

People with ASD can also respond in unusual ways to sensory input. For instance, they may be overly sensitive to loud noises, bright lights or unexpected touch, and may seek sensations such as touching or mouthing objects or body-rocking.

These social communication challenges, and difficulties coping with change and sensory differences, can lead to confusion, frustration, anxiety and difficult or unusual behaviour which are more pronounced in some situations than others.

ASD is a spectrum condition which means that, while all people with ASD share certain difficulties, this condition can present itself in a variety of ways and to varying extents. Although incredibly variable, some of the challenges that may be experienced by the person with ASD could include:

- difficulty understanding what you say
- difficulty with eye contact and other nonverbal body language
- being awkward and ill at ease in a social situation
- difficulty telling you what they want or need
- needing to seek certain sensory experiences (such as certain textures and movements)
- difficulty tolerating certain sensory experiences (such as certain sounds, tastes and textures)
- unusual or challenging behaviours in response to their confusion and stress
- difficulty learning new skills
- comparatively advanced skills in certain areas
- preoccupation with certain objects and topics
- repetitive behaviours
- always wanting to do certain things the same way or to keep things the same.

While everyone can and will exhibit some of these characteristics at some point or another, it is the pattern of behaviours, their intensity, and the fact that they persist beyond the typical age that leads to a diagnosis of ASD.

HOW COMMON IS ASD?

Due to the complex nature of the disorder and changes in clinical definitions over time, research findings on the prevalence rate of ASD in children vary considerably.

A recent review by the United States Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2014) reported a prevalence of one in 68 children with as many as five times more boys than girls.

Currently most Australian autism service providers are using an estimated prevalence rate of one in every 100 children for planning purposes, as supported by a review of prevalence studies conducted by Autism Victoria (Richdale, 2011).

WHAT CAUSES ASD?

ASD results from biological or neurological differences in the brain. In most cases, the cause of autism spectrum disorder is unknown. Research suggests that there may be a genetic basis in many instances although not all.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO HELP INDIVIDUALS WITH ASD?

Although there is no known cure for ASD, there are a range of education (for children), therapy and support options that will assist to reduce some of the challenges associated with ASD, enhance the development of skills and improve quality of life for the person with ASD and their family.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK MY CHILD/PARTNER MAY HAVE ASD?

It can often be difficult to know where to start if you suspect a family member may have ASD, however initially we would suggest that you:

- Discuss your concerns about your child with their teachers, therapists and other professionals that already know him/her.
- Discuss your concerns with your family doctor. He may suggest a referral to a paediatrician (or in some cases a child psychiatrist). For adults this referral may be to a psychiatrist or psychologist.
- Call Autism Queensland. We may be able to assist with information about ASD, useful strategies and tips, information about other agencies or professionals and general support.

HOW CAN I CONTACT AUTISM QUEENSLAND?

Autism Queensland provides services for all Queenslanders with ASD and their family.

Email: <mailto:admin@autismqld.com.au> **Website:** www.autismqld.com.au

References

CDC. (2013) *Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders – Autism and developmental disabilities monitoring Network, 14 sites, United States, 2008*. Accessed on 10/12/13.

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Richdale, A. (2011). *Prevalence of autism spectrum disorder in Australia. Position Statement*. Victoria: Amaze.