

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a complex neurodevelopmental condition (how a person's brain develops and works) characterised by persistent challenges in social interaction, e.g. communication, restricted interests, and repetitive behaviours or fixed interests.

It starts in early childhood and usually affects functioning across different parts of a person's life. It can affect anyone, no matter their background, race, or income level. Autism is about four times more common in boys than in girls.



Background

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that about 1 in out of every 100 people worldwide has autism. In the United States, recent studies show that 1 in every 36 children has been diagnosed with autism. In South Africa, exact numbers are unclear, but experts estimate that about 270,000 people in the country have autism, with around 5,000 new cases being diagnosed every year.

People living with ASD often need different kinds of support, which can include help with their health, emotions, learning, and social life. While South African medical aids provide some level of coverage for these needs, it is important that we keep speaking up for better, more complete healthcare and education services. Getting the right help early, making

sure families are involved, and giving everyone fair access to services can make a big difference in their lives.

Signs and Symptoms of Autism

People with autism are all different, but some common signs and symptoms may include:

- **Communication challenges:**
 - Not responding to their name or appearing not to hear you at times.
 - Finding it hard to understand what other people are feeling.
 - Finding it hard to express how they feel.
 - Speaking with an abnormal tone or rhythm, such as using a singsong voice or robotic speech.

- Taking things very literally – for example, not understanding sarcasm or phrases like “break a leg”.
- Not understanding social “rules,” such as not talking over people.

- **Behavioural traits:**

- Resisting cuddling and holding.
- Getting very anxious about social situations.
- Finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on their own.
- Seeming blunt, rude, or uninterested in others without meaning to.
- Having the same daily routine and getting very anxious if it changes.
- Performing repetitive movements, such as rocking, spinning, or hand flapping.
- Having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities.
- Liking to plan things carefully before doing them.
- Performing activities that could cause self-harm, such as biting or head-banging.

- **Sensory sensitivities:**

- Having challenges with balance or movement, such as being clumsy, walking on their toes, or moving in a stiff or unusual way.
- Avoiding eye contact.

Women with autism may be more likely to:

- Have learned to hide signs of autism to ‘fit in’ - by copying people who do not have autism.
- Be quieter and hide their feelings.
- Appear to cope better with social situations.
- Show fewer signs of repetitive behaviours.

This means it can be harder to confirm if a woman is autistic.

Types of Autism

Previously, different types of autism were diagnosed separately, including:

- **Autistic Disorder:** This was the most typical form of autism, with obvious problems with speech, social contact, and behaviour.
- **Asperger’s Syndrome:** People with Asperger’s had less severe symptoms and could talk normally, but had problems with social interactions.
- **Pervasive Developmental Disorder:** This was used when a person had some signs of autism but not enough to fit the other types exactly.

The medical field now groups all these types under the single term autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Causes and risk factors of Autism

There is no single known cause of autism, but studies suggest that a combination of genetic and environmental factors may play a role.

The following factors could increase the risk of autism development:

- Having a family member with autism.
- Certain genetic conditions (for example, Fragile X syndrome).
- Being born to older parents (mother is older than 35 years).
- Low birth weight or premature birth.
- Exposure to heavy metals and environmental toxins during pregnancy.
- Maternal history of viral infections.
- Exposure to medications such as valproic acid or thalidomide during pregnancy.
- Brain structures that show abnormalities.

There is no link between vaccines and autism.

Many people have wondered if there is a connection between autism and childhood vaccines. Studies have shown that there is no link at all. The first study that caused this worry was later found to be wrong and was taken down due to poor design and questionable research methods.

Not giving your child vaccines can be dangerous. It puts them and others at risk of serious illnesses like whooping cough, measles, or mumps.

Complications of Autism

Autism can sometimes lead to other challenges, such as:

- Difficulty in school or work settings.
- Anxiety or depression.
- Epilepsy or seizures.
- Sensory processing difficulties - the brain has trouble receiving, interpreting, and responding to sensory information (like sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch).
- Sleep disorders.
- Digestive (gastrointestinal) problems such as chronic constipation, abdominal pain, reflux, and bowel inflammation.
- Eating problems such as chronic overeating leading to obesity and eating non-food items (pica)
- Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), which

makes it hard for a person to focus, stay organised, manage time, or sit still. They may also act without thinking, which can affect their learning and daily lives.

- Self-injury and aggression.
- Increased risk of victimisation and being bullied.

Autism prevention

There is no known way to prevent autism. However, early diagnosis and intervention can significantly improve outcomes. Pregnant women are encouraged to attend regular prenatal visits, avoid harmful substances, and ensure a balanced diet.

Diagnosis of Autism

Autism is usually diagnosed through a combination of behavioural assessments, developmental screenings, and observations by healthcare professionals. There is no single medical test for autism, but diagnosis may involve:

- Developmental checklists and questionnaires.
- Interviews with parents or caregivers.
- Evaluations by specialists such as paediatricians, psychologists, or speech therapists.
- Diagnostic criteria for ASD according to DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition).

Treatment and management of Autism

There is no cure for autism, and the best support or therapy depends on what each person needs. However, most people respond best to highly structured and specialised programs.

Holistic needs of individuals with ASD and types of support programs may help:

- **Physical needs:** Children and adults with ASD might have problems with how they experience the world around them, like being overly sensitive to sounds or touch. They may also struggle with coordination, have tummy issues, or have trouble sleeping. Therapies like occupational or physical therapy can help improve movement, balance, and how they react to different sensations.
- **Mental and emotional needs:** Because it can be hard for people with ASD to connect with others or express themselves, they might feel anxious, sad, or overwhelmed. Talking therapy (like counselling), help with managing emotions, and sometimes medication can make a real difference in helping them feel more stable and understood.

- **Educational needs:** Many children with ASD benefit from individualised education programs (IEP's) and may require placement in special education settings or inclusive classrooms with learning support facilitators. To meet these needs, Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) helps reinforce positive behaviours, speech and language therapy improve communication skills. Parent training is also used to provide parents with tips and tools to support their child's learning and development and deal with problematic behaviour.
- **Social and life skills:** ASD can affect the ability to manage daily tasks, form relationships, and gain employment. These challenges can be addressed through life skills training to teach practical daily activities, social skills training to enhance interpersonal interactions, and supported employment programs to help individuals prepare for, find, and maintain meaningful work.
- **Medication:** There is no medicine that can cure autism, but some medicines can help with symptoms like anxiety, aggression, or mood swings. Examples include:
 - Medicines to help calm strong emotions or aggression (like antipsychotics)
 - Medicines for worry or sadness (like antidepressants)

Prescribed Minimum Benefit (PMB) Regulations

Autism Spectrum Disorder is not one of the conditions listed under the Prescribed Minimum Benefits

This means that the costs of tests, treatment, and care for ASD will be paid according to your medical scheme's specific rules. Any limits or sub-limits in your plan will apply.

However, some health problems linked to ASD, like depression, may be covered as PMB conditions on their own. These will be paid for in line with the PMB rules.

It is very important to read your medical scheme rules and check which services they will cover for ASD-related care.

“Autism is not a limitation but a different way of experiencing the world. With understanding, support, and acceptance, individuals with autism can lead fulfilling lives and contribute uniquely to society.”

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