

What Is Autism?

According to the Center for Disease Control:

Autism is one of a group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). ASDs are developmental disabilities that cause substantial impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual behaviors and interests. Many people with ASDs also have unusual ways of learning, paying attention, and reacting to different sensations. The thinking and learning abilities of people with ASDs can vary—from gifted to severely challenged. An ASD begins before the age of 3 and lasts throughout a person's life.



ASDs include autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder - not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS, including atypical autism), and Asperger syndrome. These conditions all have some of the same symptoms, but they differ in terms of when the symptoms start, how severe they are, and the exact nature of the symptoms. The three conditions, along with Rett syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder, make up the broad diagnosis category of pervasive developmental disorders.

Diagnosing Autism:

- How to diagnose?
 - Autism cannot be diagnosed biologically
 - Autism is diagnosed by behavioral and developmental symptoms

The Diagnostic Criteria for Autism includes:

- A. A total of six (or more) items from (1), (2), and (3), with at least two from (1), and one each from (2) and (3):
 1. qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
 - a. marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
 - b. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 - c. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest)
 - d. lack of social or emotional reciprocity
 2. qualitative impairments in communication as manifested by at least one of the following:

- a. delay in, or total lack of, the development of spoken language (not accompanied by an attempt to compensate through alternative modes of communication such as gesture or mime)
 - b. in individuals with adequate speech, marked impairment in the ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
 - c. stereotyped and repetitive use of language or idiosyncratic language
 - d. lack of varied, spontaneous make-believe play or social imitative play appropriate to developmental level
3. restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:
- a. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
 - b. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
 - c. stereotyped and repetitive motor manners (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 - d. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- B. Delays or abnormal functioning in at least one of the following areas, with onset prior to age 3 years: (1) social interaction, (2) language as used in social communication, or (3) symbolic or imaginative play.
- C. The disturbance is not better accounted for by Rett's Disorder or Childhood Disintegrative Disorder.

Diagnostic Criteria for Asperger's Disorder

- A. Qualitative impairment in social interaction, as manifested by at least two of the following:
- 1. marked impairment in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction
 - 2. failure to develop peer relationships appropriate to developmental level
 - 3. a lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people (e.g., by a lack of showing, bringing, or pointing out objects of interest to other people)
 - 4. lack of social or emotional reciprocity
- B. Restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests and activities, as manifested by at least one of the following:
- 1. encompassing preoccupation with one or more stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest that is abnormal either in intensity or focus
 - 2. apparently inflexible adherence to specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals
 - 3. stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms (e.g., hand or finger flapping or twisting, or complex whole-body movements)
 - 4. persistent preoccupation with parts of objects
- C. The disturbance causes clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.
- D. There is no clinically significant general delay in language (e.g., single words used by age 2 years, communicative phrases used by age 3 years).

- E. There is no clinically significant delay in cognitive development or in the development of age-appropriate self-help skills, adaptive behavior (other than in social interaction), and curiosity about the environment in childhood.
- F. Criteria are not met for another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or Schizophrenia.

Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (Including Atypical Autism)

This category should be used when there is a severe and pervasive impairment in the development of reciprocal social interaction associated with impairment in either verbal or nonverbal communication skills or with the presence of stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities, but the criteria are not met for a specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Schizophrenia, Schizotypal Personality Disorder, or Avoidant Personality Disorder. For example, this category includes "atypical autism" - presentations that do not meet the criteria for Autistic Disorder because of late age at onset, atypical symptomatology, or subthreshold symptomatology, or all of these.

Diagnostic Criteria for Rett's Disorder

- A. All of the following:
 - 1. apparently normal prenatal and perinatal development
 - 2. apparently normal psychomotor development through the first 5 months after birth
 - 3. normal head circumference at birth
- B. Onset of all of the following after the period of normal development:
 - 1. deceleration of head growth between ages 5 and 48 months
 - 2. loss of previously acquired purposeful hand skills between 5 and 30 months with the subsequent development of stereotyped hand movements (e.g., hand-wringing or hand washing)
 - 3. loss of social engagement early in the course (although often social interaction develops later)
 - 4. appearance of poorly coordinated gait or trunk movements
 - 5. severely impaired expressive and receptive language development with severe psychomotor retardation

Diagnostic Criteria for Childhood Disintegrative Disorder

- A. Apparently normal development for at least the first 2 years after birth as manifested by the presence of age-appropriate verbal and nonverbal communication, social relationships, play, and adaptive behavior.
- B. Clinically significant loss of previously acquired skills (before age 10 years) in at least two of the following areas:
 - 1. expressive or receptive language
 - 2. social skills or adaptive behavior
 - 3. bowel or bladder control
 - 4. play
 - 5. motor skills
- C. Abnormalities of functioning in at least two of the following areas:

1. qualitative impairment in social interaction (e.g., impairment in nonverbal behaviors, failure to develop peer relationships, lack of social or emotional reciprocity)
 2. qualitative impairments in communication (e.g., delay or lack of spoken language, inability to initiate or sustain a conversation, stereotyped and repetitive use of language, lack of varied make-believe play)
 3. restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interest, and activities, including motor stereotypes and mannerisms
- D. The disturbance is not better accounted for by another specific Pervasive Developmental Disorder or by Schizophrenia

Brief Summary of Autism Spectrum Disorders:

Categories of Autism: Pervasive Development Disorders

- Autism
 - Impaired social interaction, language, pretend play and communication
 - Repetitive behavior
 - Nearly 75% of autistic children have some degree of mental retardation
- Pervasive Development Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)
 - Significant problems with communication and play but are too social to be considered autistic
- Rett Syndrome
 - Rare disorder that includes PDD symptoms as well as impaired motor skills and have poor coordination
- Asperger's Syndrome
 - Difficulty in social interaction and communication
 - Average and above average intelligence
 - Develop normally in language and cognition
- Child Disintegrative Disorder
 - Between ages 2-10, child loses already developed social and language skills and lose control of body functions