

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

These are developmental disorders that can lead to difficulties in social interaction, communication and behavior. People with ASD usually learn, communicate, interact and behave differently. These differences usually become apparent before the age of three (3) and their signs and symptoms vary depending on the severity of the disorder in each individual.

Signs and symptoms

- They find it difficult to relate to others.
- They avoid eye contact.
- They have difficulty understanding other people's feelings, including talking about their feelings.
- They do not seem to pay attention when spoken to, but respond to other sounds.
- Prefer to be held only when they want to be held.
- They find it difficult to express their needs in words or habitual movements.
- Do not look at objects when other people point to them.
- Repeat actions over and over again.
- Have unusual reactions to smell, taste, appearance, touch or sounds.
- Become upset at new situations or changes in their routine and environment.
- Repeat words or phrases, rather than using normal language.
- Intestinal problems.
- Low muscle tone and seizures, among other aspects such as socio-economic issues that may hinder access to services.



Causes

A specific cause for ASD has not yet been established. It is likely that a number of factors lead to the development of symptoms, however, research indicates that it occurs in all racial,

ethnic, socio-economic groups and the diagnosis is more common in boys than in girls.

Assessment and Diagnosis

There is no single test to diagnose the disorder, so assessment by different specialists is necessary. At 18 and 24 months, children are tested specifically for ASD. This assessment, usually by means of a questionnaire.

The doctor may require:

1. Developmental assessment: This is a detailed and in-depth assessment of the child's development. For this assessment, a team of specialists, including a developmental paediatrician, neurologist, child psychologist, speech-language pathologist, occupational therapist and others, evaluate the child. The results will highlight the strengths and challenges the child faces. This may lead to recommendations for testing, therapy or certain specialised treatments.

2. Comprehensive diagnostic evaluation: After conducting specific evaluations, such as hearing, vision, genetic, neurological and psychological tests, they will identify the appropriate treatment.

Treatments

Currently, there is no cure for ASD. The manifestation of ASD varies from person to person. Therefore, different treatments can be

used to reduce the symptoms that interfere with daily functioning and quality of life for those with ASD. Research shows that early treatment and intervention (before the age of 3 years) can improve development.

Treatment may include:

•Behavioural Approach: EI which focuses on identifying and understanding what happens before and after the manifestation of the behavior.



In this therapy, desired behaviors are reinforced and undesired behaviors are discouraged in order to improve different skills. At the same time, speech and language skills, physical and occupational skills are worked on.

•Educational Approach: Focuses on adapting learning to the needs and potential of the person with ASD.

•Social-Relational Approach: Focuses on improving social skills and creating emotional bonds between the person with ASD and their parents, carers, mentors and peers.

Pharmacological Approach: Prescription medications are used for the management of some symptoms of the condition such as attention deficit, energy levels, avoidance of self-harm, anxiety, depression, seizures, sleep problems, stomach or gastrointestinal complaints.

•Psychological approach: Focuses on addressing symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as behavioral symptoms that may arise as a consequence of ASD.

•Alternative Approach: Different types of therapies are used as a complement to conventional treatments. These may include special feeding, herbal supplements, chiropractic care, animal therapy, art therapy,

mindfulness or relaxation therapies. Before starting any alternative treatment, the team of specialists caring for the person with ASD should be consulted.



Social and Emocional

For recommendations, tools and resources on how you and your family can deal with the emotional and physical concerns that arise during and after treatment, please visit your primary doctor or call the following phone lines:



First Health Call

1-844-347-7801

TTY/TDD: 1-844-347-7804

APS Health: 787-641-9133

References:

- <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/autism-spectrum-disorder>
- <https://medlineplus.gov/ency/article/001526.htm>
- <https://autismsociety.org/the-autism-experience/>

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