

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)



What is ASD?

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), or autism, is a lifelong, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience and interact with the world around them. There are around 700,000 people in the UK living with autism, which is more than 1 in every 100 people. The exact cause of autism is still unknown although research suggests that a combination of genetic and environmental causes may account for differences in development.

Symptoms

People with autism may have difficulty reading social cues and knowing when to speak or listen; reading facial expressions can also be challenging, if not impossible. As well as communication and interaction difficulties, many people with autism will also have specific behaviours such as obsessions, repetitive behaviour and routine, sensory sensitivity, anxiety, difficulty with change and challenging behaviour.

Tourette Syndrome (TS) and ASD share similar symptoms:

Physical features: repetitive movements and complex body movements (e.g. hand-flapping, finger-licking, spinning)

Speech abnormalities: involuntary repetition of words, phrases or sentences

Sensory sensitivities: over or under sensitive senses, i.e. hearing, touch

Although movement features of TS and autism may look the same, the cause behind them is different. In TS, physical tics are involuntary and people usually feel a physical sensation (premonitory urge) before the tic, which is then relieved by the tic.

In autism, repetitive movements are thought to be a result of the person trying to gain some control over their sensory

experience. For example, focusing on repetitive movement may help someone to reduce or increase sensory input when they are feeling over or under stimulated. Repetitive behaviour is also thought to be a way of dealing with stress and anxiety, or something to help pass time whilst bringing enjoyment.

Managing ASD

There are many approaches and forms of support which can help people with autism to manage their condition and fulfil their potential. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) has produced guidance on interventions for both children and adults.

If you think you or your child may have autism the first step is to contact your GP. Your GP will make a referral for further assessment and diagnosis. It can also be useful to make an appointment with the school's Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCO) or Learning Support Teacher to discuss your concerns, as teaching staff may have noticed similar behaviours and characteristics, and be able to offer support in pursuing a diagnosis for your child.

For more information and support you can contact the following organisations:

The National Autistic Society – leading UK charity for autistic people and their families

www.autism.org.uk
0808 800 4104

National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) – provides guidance, advice, quality standards and information services for health, public health and social care

www.nice.org.uk