

## What Is Autism?

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(This is Part 1 of a 2-part series)

Public awareness of autism has risen considerably since the turn of the new millennium, largely resulting from increased media coverage, and a rapidly expanding body of scientific knowledge.

Parents and caregivers understandably have many concerns over what they read on the Internet, and hear in the media and from friends. Information on autism abounds, some of it true or partly true, some of it entirely false, and all of it very confusing.

Not everything is known about these complex, puzzling, and lifelong disorders – far from it. What is known, however widely unrealized by the public, is that autism is not a singular condition, just as a cold is not a singular condition.

Just as there are hundreds of viruses that cause the common cold, there are many known and doubtless many more unknown causes of autism. Just as the symptoms of the common cold are varied and diverse, so, too, are the symptoms and timing of autism. Some children have mild symptoms, others quite severe. Some children show symptoms very early in life, others later, and suddenly.

By definition, autism must show itself by the third birthday. Most cases are not detected until between age one and three years, when the parents begin to realize that their child is not communicating as expected for their age. But most forms of ASD actually begin to show during infancy, as retrospective analyses of family home videos often reveals.

Regrettably, there are as yet no certain biological markers of autism, no blood tests that can determine the presence of autism. And autism does not announce itself in the delivery room.

Instead, doctors diagnose autism using a set of behavioral indicators that have evolved over the six decades since the term “autism” was first used. Today, the term actually applies to three diagnostic groups of developmental disability, which doctors refer to as **autistic spectrum disorders** (ASDs).

While such grouping implies that each represents a degree of severity of the same entity, there is actually no evidence for this. They could, and might very well, have unrelated causes. The idea that autism may not be a single disease but rather several has gathered support in recent years from evidence supplied by magnetic resonance imaging of the brains of autistic children.

Although the three forms of ASD – Asperger Syndrome, autistic disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) – certainly differ, they share three main features. Children with an ASD have impairments in social skills, and in communication, and they have restricted interests and repetitive behaviors.

The popular image of autism is strongly colored by an entity called **Asperger Syndrome (AS)**. AS has become a common – perhaps too common – diagnosis assigned to young and often school-aged children who have difficulty relating to their peers.

Unlike classic autistic disorder, people with AS often have above average or even superior intellectual functioning. As children, they show no delays in the development of linguistic and cognitive abilities. People with AS may, in fact, have superior verbal fluency, and they often have strong, though unusually focused intellectual interests.

However, without exception they have impairments in social skills. They are not intuitively able to read other people’s feelings, or detect or respond to social cues. This often leads them to become labeled “odd”, or “different” by their teachers, peers, or even their parents.

By contrast, children with **autistic disorder** don't talk much; when they do, they often talk to themselves, or merely echo what they hear. To varying degrees they are withdrawn and inaccessible, seeming to regard people as unwelcome intruders. Eye contact is infrequent, and parents' bids for attention are often ignored.

In regards to intelligence, children with autistic disorder vary from the gifted to the severely challenged. They often have an excellent memory, but they lack imagination, choosing to interpret what is said to them concretely.

Children with autistic disorder often play in a repetitive manner. They demand that their toys and clothes remain in the same place every day. They commonly do not cope well with transitions, or changes in routine. They are also very intolerant of strong sensory stimuli.

Finally, children with autistic disorder may become aggressive, self-injurious, or resort to self-stimulatory behaviors, which serve to calm them. As a result, these children's socially inappropriate behaviors make it difficult for families to go out in public places.

Autistic spectrum disorders know no racial, geographic, or social boundaries. They occur 4 to 5 times more often in boys than girls, and more commonly among siblings of an affected child.

The CDC estimates that about 1 in 500 American children have autistic disorder, and that 1 in every 150 children meet diagnostic criteria for one of the autistic spectrum disorders.

It is clear that more cases of autism in recent years are being recognized, but it is not clear whether more cases of autism are actually occurring. Most experts feel that autism has in fact not become more common, that there exists no real "epidemic" of autistic spectrum disorders.

Rather, they believe, the "rise" can be explained largely by that physicians are applying the diagnosis far more commonly and correctly than in the past.

Before 1980, there were no standard criteria for autism. Any diagnosis of autism was based on the definition of each individual physician. People now labeled autistic in the past might have been given some other diagnosis.

For example, a number of studies have revealed that children once labeled as "retarded" are now more likely to be given the more specific diagnosis of "autistic". Which is not to say that all, or even many, autistic children are cognitively delayed.

Growing evidence also suggests that a significant portion of the "rise" in autism can be explained by the gradual broadening of the definition of ASDs to include children with milder, more subtle symptoms. Children once described as "quirky" or "unusual" are today more likely to be diagnosed with an ASD. Heightened awareness of autism among parents and doctors has certainly aided this phenomenon.