

April is Autism Acceptance Month



Autism Spectrum Disorder is a complex developmental condition characterized by challenges in social interaction, communication, and repetitive behaviors. As awareness of autism increases, so does the need to understand its diagnostic characteristics, the wide spectrum of behaviors it encompasses, available therapies, and its disproportionate impact on communities of color.

Access to Care

Autism awareness is crucial for fostering inclusion and providing support for individuals on the spectrum. Understanding its characteristics, recognizing the broad range of behaviors, and advocating for accessible therapies can help ensure that all individuals—regardless of race or background—receive the support they need to thrive. By addressing disparities in diagnosis and care, society can move toward a more inclusive and equitable future for all individuals with autism.

Diagnostic Characteristics of Autism

Autism is typically diagnosed in early childhood, though some individuals may not receive a diagnosis until later in life. The core characteristics of autism include difficulties with social communication and interaction, repetitive behaviors, and restricted interests. Common signs include delayed speech development, difficulty understanding social cues, repetitive movements such as hand-flapping or rocking, and sensitivity to sensory stimuli like loud noises or bright lights.

Diagnosis is typically made through behavioral observations, standardized tests, and evaluations conducted by developmental pediatricians, psychologists, or neurologists. Early diagnosis is crucial as it allows for timely interventions that can significantly improve a person's quality of life.

The Spectrum of Behaviors

The autism spectrum refers to a range of neurodevelopmental differences characterized by challenges in social communication, sensory processing, and behavior patterns. The term "spectrum" in ASD highlights the wide range of symptoms and levels of impairment that individuals may experience. Some individuals with autism may have significant intellectual disabilities and require substantial support, while others may have average or above-average intelligence with difficulties in social communication.

Additionally, some, not all, autistic individuals may have exceptional skills in specific areas such as mathematics, music, or memory recall, often referred to as "savant abilities." However, the needs and challenges of each autistic person vary, making individualized treatment and support essential.

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www.dshs.wa.gov/fwb

fwb@dshs.wa.gov





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Key aspects of the autism spectrum include:

1. Social Communication and Interaction

- Difficulty interpreting social cues such as facial expressions, tone of voice, or body language.
- Differences in conversational styles, including speaking in monologues, difficulty with back-and-forth conversation, or struggling to understand implied meanings.
- Challenges in forming and maintaining relationships, though many autistic individuals desire connection in their own way.

2. Repetitive Behaviors and Special Interests

- Engagement in repetitive movements (e.g., hand-flapping, rocking) or speech patterns (e.g., echolalia, scripting).
- Strong, highly focused interests in specific topics, sometimes to the exclusion of other activities.
- A preference for routine and predictability, with difficulty adapting to sudden changes.

3. Sensory Sensitivities

- Over- or under-responsiveness to sensory stimuli, such as lights, sounds, textures, or smells.
- Heightened sensitivity to specific noises or physical sensations, leading to distress or avoidance.
- Seeking sensory input in unique ways, such as touching objects repeatedly or enjoying deep pressure.

4. Cognitive and Language Differences

- Some autistic people have strong verbal skills, while others may be non-speaking and communicate through alternative means.
- Thinking styles may be highly logical, detail-oriented, or pattern-focused.
- Some autistic people have executive functioning challenges, such as difficulty with organization, transitions, or multi-step tasks.

Therapies and Interventions

While there is no cure for autism, early intervention and tailored therapies can help individuals develop essential skills. Common therapies include:

- **Applied Behavior Analysis:** A structured approach that reinforces positive behaviors and reduces harmful or disruptive ones.
- **Speech Therapy:** Helps improve communication skills for individuals who struggle with verbal and nonverbal communication.
- **Occupational Therapy:** Assists with sensory processing issues and daily living skills.
- **Social Skills Training:** Supports people in learning how to interact appropriately in social settings.
- **Medication:** While not a cure, medication may be prescribed to manage anxiety, depression, or attention issues that often co-occur with autism.



Increase in Autism Diagnoses

The prevalence of autism has risen significantly over the past few decades. Factors contributing to this increase include better diagnostic criteria, increased awareness, and more thorough screening processes. Environmental factors and genetic predisposition are also areas of ongoing research.

For example, the child may display heightened sensitivity to noises and sounds, reacting with visible distress to everyday environmental stimuli such as vacuum cleaners, sirens, or even the hum of fluorescent lights. They may cover their ears, become agitated, or insist on avoiding certain places altogether. At the same time, the child may experience intense emotional breakdowns over seemingly minor disruptions to their routine or expectations. These meltdowns are not typical tantrums but rather overwhelming responses to sensory overload or unexpected changes. The child may struggle to self-regulate, requiring extended periods to calm down.

Despite these challenges, the child may also exhibit hyperverbal tendencies—speaking in elaborate detail about specific interests, often well beyond what is expected for their age. They may dominate conversations with their specialized knowledge, discussing topics such as space, trains, or sports with remarkable depth, yet struggle with reciprocal conversation or shifting topics based on social cues.

While these traits individually may not indicate autism, their combination—sensory sensitivities, emotional dysregulation, and a deep but sometimes inflexible verbal engagement—warrants further observation. If these behaviors persist or interfere with daily life, a professional evaluation may help provide clarity and appropriate support.

Despite increased awareness about the prevalence of autism, communities of color often face disparities in diagnosis and treatment. Studies indicate that Black and Latino children are diagnosed later than their white counterparts, delaying access to crucial interventions. This gap is attributed to socioeconomic barriers, lack of healthcare access, cultural stigmas, and biases in the medical community. Addressing these disparities requires community education, increased access to diagnostic services, and culturally competent healthcare providers who can bridge the gap in autism awareness and intervention.

