

What you need to know about autism spectrum disorder

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(HealthDay)—Autism spectrum disorder—or ASD—is a developmental

disability now diagnosed in about one in 37 boys and one in 151 girls in the United States.

Researchers are learning more about why differences in the brain develop and result in [autism spectrum disorder](#), which includes autism and Asperger's syndrome. Both [environmental factors](#) and genetic risks are being investigated, but more studies are needed to reveal all the answers.

There's one thing known for sure: The sooner ASD can be identified, the sooner a child can be helped.

Signs of autism spectrum disorder are often apparent early in life. Children may show hints within their first few months, like the baby who doesn't seem interested in people around him. Other ASD babies seem to develop normally until 18 to 24 months, at which point they stop learning or lose skills, like the toddler who doesn't want to play peek-a-boo.

Most signs typically appear between 12 and 18 months of age.

First signs of concern. The child:

- Doesn't respond to his or her name by 12 months.
- Doesn't point to or show interest in objects by 14 months.
- Doesn't play pretend games by 18 months.
- Avoids eye contact.
- Has delayed speech and language skills.

Later signs of concern. The child:

- Repeats words over and over.
- Gives unrelated answers to questions.

- Gets upset by minor changes in routine.
- Flaps hands, rocks his or her body or spins in circles.
- Has unusual reactions to the way things sound, smell, taste, look or feel.

Children with ASD often learn in ways that are different from the norm. They might be great with puzzles or computer games, but struggle with talking, sharing or making friends. They might have a hard time showing feelings and understanding the feelings of others, and have sensory issues and not want to be touched.

Pediatricians should screen all children for developmental delays and disabilities during key wellness visits. This involves a short test to check if the child is learning basic age-appropriate skills. The doctor might talk and play with your child to see how he or she talks, acts and learns.

Screening Schedule:

- Developmental screening at wellness visits at 9, 18 and 24 or 30 months.
- Screening specifically for ASD at 18 and 24 months.
- More frequent screening if at high risk, such as having an immediate family member with ASD or showing behaviors associated with ASD.

If the doctor sees any signs of a problem, he or she should recommend a comprehensive evaluation from a specialist, such as a developmental pediatrician, or a child neurologist or psychologist.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has [information for families](#) about ASD.

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