

Autism

Definition

Autism Spectrum Disorder, is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder that affects the way a person communicates and relates to people and the world around them. It can affect body language and posture, social interactions and relationships, how you engage with your interests, and sensory processing capacities. Autism exists in all cultures, ethnicities, races, and gender identities.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) classifies autism as a disorder. However, many autistic people prefer the terms, neurological “difference” or “condition,” which remove the negative associations with the word, “disorder.” Being autistic means that your brain may process information differently than non-autistic, or neurotypical, people.

Autism exists on a spectrum, which means that while all people on the spectrum will experience some of the differences mentioned above, the degree to which each autistic person experiences them and the amount of support they need, will vary. This is sometimes influenced by whether the person on the autism spectrum has any co-occurring health conditions. It is also influenced by the accessibility and relative safety of the environment and society autistic people inhabit; a society that we all contribute to and live in.¹

What does the Research Say?

Children with autism typically have four or five other conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The conditions a child has, influences whether he/she is diagnosed with autism sooner or later than average. Clinicians should screen for these conditions in children with autism and consider treatment plans that take them into account.

Data from 783 children with autism at age 4, and 1,091 children with autism at age 8 and found the prevalence of 18 conditions and features, including single-gene conditions associated with autism, ADHD, sleep issues or gastrointestinal problems. More than 95 percent of the children have at least one condition in addition to autism. About 69 percent of the 8-year-olds and 53 percent of the 4-year-olds have four or more conditions; 26 percent of 8-year-olds and 13 percent of 4-year-olds have seven or more.²

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What Autism Is NOT

- Autism is not an illness or disease.
- Autism is not temporary.
- Autism is not contagious.
- Autism is not caused by vaccinations.
- Autism is not caused by parenting styles.
- Autism is not something that disappears in adulthood.

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¹ [About Autism | Autism Ontario](#). Retrieved 1 June 2022.

² [Co-occurring conditions alter timing of autism diagnosis | Spectrum | Autism Research News \(spectrumnews.org\)](#). Retrieved 1 June 2022.

Co-occurring Conditions

To identify the co-occurring conditions, clinicians looked at school and medical records. They found that the prevalence of some conditions varies with age. For example, children with autism are more likely to have ADHD, anxiety and motor problems at age 8 than at age 4. Some conditions can significantly alter the timing of autism diagnosis. For example, children who show regression, injure themselves or have frequent temper tantrums received an autism evaluation 4 to 14 months earlier than those without these conditions, the researchers found.

By contrast, ADHD can delay autism diagnosis by a year on average. Anxiety and oppositional defiant disorder can also delay evaluations for autism by up to 10 months. The results appeared 9 March in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*. Other studies also suggest that ADHD significantly delays autism diagnosis. A delay in autism diagnosis may cause children to miss out on the benefits of early intervention.³

Traits or conditions which commonly accompany autism

The conditions that overlap with autism generally fall into one of four groups: classic medical problems, such as epilepsy, gastrointestinal issues or sleep disorders; developmental diagnoses, such as intellectual disability or language delay; mental-health conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive-compulsive disorder or depression; and genetic conditions, including fragile X syndrome and tuberous sclerosis complex.⁴

When to Seek Professional Help

Ontario Autism assessment and diagnosis suggests: If you have concerns about your child's development, make an appointment with your child's doctor as soon as possible. Autism is tested and diagnosed using professional assessment tools and by evaluating a combination of certain behaviours. These behaviours can include delays in how your child communicates and developmental disabilities. Qualified professionals who have undergone specific training to assess and diagnose autism include, but are not limited to:

- doctors, such as family physicians, pediatricians, developmental pediatricians and psychiatrists
- psychologists and psychological associates
- nurse practitioners

There are five diagnostic hubs across Ontario where you can get an autism assessment for your child or youth. Contact your local diagnostic hub to find out how to apply for a diagnostic assessment.⁵

³ Ibid.

⁴ [Autism health — Conditions that accompany autism, explained \(spectrumnews.org\)](https://www.spectrumnews.org). Retrieved 1 June 2022.

⁵ [Autism assessment and diagnosis | Ontario.ca](https://www.ontario.ca)

Diagnostic Hub Locations

[McMaster Children's Hospital / Ron Joyce Children's Health Centre](#)

237 Barton Street East

Hamilton, Ontario Tel: 905-521-2100 ext. 78222 Email: DPR-intake@hhsc.ca

[Children's Treatment Network of Simcoe York](#)

165 Ferris Lane

Barrie, Ontario Toll-free: 1-866-377-0286 Fax: 705-792-2775

[Child and Community Resources](#)

662 Falconbridge Road

Sudbury, Ontario Tel: 705-525-0055 Toll-free: 1-877-996-1599

[Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario](#) (CHEO)/Ottawa Children's Treatment Centre (OCTC)

395 Smyth Road

Ottawa, Ontario Tel: 613-737-2757 Toll-free: 1-800-565-4839

[Holland Bloorview Kids Rehabilitation Hospital](#)

Child Development Intake

150 Kilgour Road

Toronto, Ontario Tel: 416-425-6220 ext. 3334 Email: cdpintake@hollandbloorview.ca

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TEN FACTS ABOUT AUTISM

AUTISM IS NEURODEVELOPMENTAL

Autism is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder affecting the way a person communicates and relates to people and the world around them.



AUTISM HAS NO CULTURAL BOUNDARIES

Autism exists in all cultures, ethnicities, races, and gender identities.



AUTISM IS A TYPE OF NEURODIVERSITY

Being autistic means that a person's brain may process information differently than non-autistic, or neurotypical, people.



AUTISM MEANS SOMETHING DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE

A person on the spectrum might talk about autism one way, while an autistic person's family or a medical professional may refer to it another way.

NEURODIVERSITY DOES NOT MEAN DISORDER

Many autistic people prefer the terms neurological "difference" or "condition", which remove the negative associations with the word "disorder."



NOT EVERY AUTISTIC PERSON IS THE SAME

Autism exists on a spectrum, meaning each person on the autism spectrum experiences autism in a different way and the support they need varies.



AUTISM DIAGNOSES ARE PREVALENT IN CHILDHOOD

1 in 66 Canadian children and youth (ages 5-17) are diagnosed with autism.



1-2% OF CANADIANS ARE AUTISTIC

Approximately 1-2% of the Canadian population is on the autism spectrum, which means there are approximately 135,000 autistic people in Ontario.

USE PERSON-FIRST OR IDENTITY-FIRST LANGUAGE

People talk about autism using person-first language (person with autism) or identity-first language (autistic person). When in doubt, just ask. The phrase, "on the autism spectrum" is usually a safe bet.



EVERY AUTISTIC PERSON CAN THRIVE WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT

Many autistic people prefer the terms "high or low support needs" rather than "high or low functioning".

