

Autism

What is autism?

Autistic people may act in a different way to other people

Autistic people may:

- find it hard to communicate and interact with other people
- find it hard to understand how other people think or feel
- find things like bright lights or loud noises overwhelming, stressful or uncomfortable
- get anxious or upset about unfamiliar situations and social events
- take longer to understand information
- do or think the same things over and over

Information:

If you think you or your child may be autistic, get advice about the signs of autism.

Autism is not an illness

Being autistic does not mean you have an illness or disease. It means your brain works in a different way from other people.

It's something you're born with. Signs of autism might be noticed when you're very young, or not until you're older.

If you're autistic, you're autistic your whole life.

Autism is not a medical condition with treatments or a "cure". But some people need support to help them with certain things.

Autistic people can live a full life

Being autistic does not have to stop you having a good life.

Like everyone, autistic people have things they're good at as well as things they struggle with.

Being autistic does not mean you can never make friends, have relationships or get a job. But you might need extra help with these things.

Autism is different for everyone

Autism is a spectrum. This means everybody with autism is different.

Some autistic people need little or no support. Others may need help from a parent or carer every day.

Some people use other names for autism

There are other names for autism used by some people, such as:

autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is the medical name for autism

Asperger's (or Asperger syndrome) is used by some people to describe autistic people with average or above average intelligence

More about Asperger's

People with Asperger's do not have the same learning disabilities that many people with autism have, but they might have a specific learning difficulty.

Some people call this "high-functioning" autism.

Doctors do not diagnose people with Asperger's anymore because it's now thought of as part of autism spectrum disorder. But if you were diagnosed with it before, this will stay as your diagnosis.

It's not clear what causes autism

Nobody knows what causes autism, or if it has a cause.

It can affect people in the same family. So it may sometimes be passed on to a child by their parents.

Autism is:

not caused by bad parenting

not caused by vaccines, such as the MMR vaccine

not linked to diet

not an infection you can spread to other people

Autistic people can have any level of intelligence

Some autistic people have average or above average intelligence.

Some autistic people have a learning disability. This means they may find it hard to look after themselves and need help with daily life.

Autistic people may have other conditions

Autistic people often have other conditions, such as:

attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

dyslexia

anxiety

depression

Epilepsy

Find out more

- [NHS autism guide](#)
- [National Autistic Society: what is autism?](#)
- [Ambitious about Autism: what is autism?](#)

Signs of autism

Autism in young children

Signs of autism in young children include:

not responding to their name

avoiding eye contact

not smiling when you smile at them

getting very upset if they do not like a certain taste, smell or sound

repetitive movements, such as flapping their hands, flicking their fingers or rocking their body

not talking as much as other children

not doing as much pretend play

repeating the same phrases

Autism in older children

Signs of autism in older children include:

not seeming to understand what others are thinking or feeling

unusual speech, such as repeating phrases and talking 'at' others

liking a strict daily routine and getting very upset if it changes

having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities

getting very upset if you ask them to do something

finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on their own

taking things very literally – for example, they may not understand phrases like "break a leg"

finding it hard to say how they feel

Autism in girls and boys

Autism can sometimes be different in girls and boys.

Autistic girls may:

hide some signs of autism by copying how other children behave and play

withdraw in situations they find difficult

appear to cope better with social situations

show fewer signs of repetitive behaviours

This means autism can be harder to spot in girls.

[The National Autistic Society has more information about autistic women and girls](#)

TGet advice if:

- [you think your child might be autistic](#)

You could speak to:

- [a GP](#)
- [a health visitor \(for children under 5\)](#)
- [any other health professional your child sees, such as another doctor or therapist](#)
- [special educational needs \(SENCO\) staff at your child's school](#)

[Getting diagnosed can help your child get any extra support they might need.](#)

[Find out how to get diagnosed](#)

Signs of autism in adults

Main signs of autism

Common signs of autism in adults include:

finding it hard to understand what others are thinking or feeling
getting very anxious about social situations
finding it hard to make friends or preferring to be on your own
seeming blunt, rude or not interested in others without meaning to
finding it hard to say how you feel
taking things very literally – for example, you may not understand sarcasm or phrases like "break a leg"
having the same routine every day and getting very anxious if it changes

Other signs of autism

You may also have other signs, like:

not understanding social "rules", such as not talking over people
avoiding eye contact
getting too close to other people, or getting very upset if someone touches or gets too close to you
noticing small details, patterns, smells or sounds that others do not
having a very keen interest in certain subjects or activities
liking to plan things carefully before doing them

Autism in women

Autistic women may be more likely to:

have learned to hide signs of autism to 'fit in' - by copying people who do not have autism
be quieter and hide their feelings
appear to cope better with social situations
show fewer signs of repetitive behaviours
This means it can be harder to tell you're autistic if you're a woman.

[The National Autistic Society have more information about autistic women and girls](#)

See a GP if:

you think you may be autistic

If you already see a health professional, such as another doctor or therapist, you could speak to them instead.

Getting diagnosed can help you get any extra support you might need.

Find out how to get diagnosed

Getting diagnosed as autistic

How to get an autism assessment

1. Talk to someone for advice

If you think you or your child have signs of autism, the next step is to talk to someone about it.

You could speak to:

- a GP
- a health visitor (for children under 5)
- any other health professional you or your child see, such as another doctor or therapist
- special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) staff at your child's school

Ask them about referring you or your child for an autism assessment.

An assessment is done by autism specialists. It's the only way to find out if you or your child are autistic.

Tips for when you speak to someone

Do

write a list of the signs of autism you think you or your child have and bring it with you

ask people who know you or your child well (like friends, family or teachers) if they have noticed any possible signs you could put on your list

bring a pen and paper so you can take notes

bring your child or someone who knows you well with you, if you think it might help (you do not have to)

Don't

try not to talk too much about other things – autism should be the main thing you talk about

2. Have an autism assessment

An autism assessment is where a team of autism specialists check if you or your child are autistic.

An assessment team may:

- ask about any problems you or your child are having
- watch how you or your child interact with other people
- speak to people who know you or your child well, such as family, friends, your GP or your child's teachers

At the end of the assessment, you'll be given a report saying if you or your child are autistic.

[Find out what happens during an autism assessment](#)

How a diagnosis can help

Parents and children

For parents and children, a diagnosis can help you:

- understand your child's needs and [how you can help your child](#)
- get [advice about support for your child at school](#)
- get [support for parents and carers of autistic people](#), such as financial benefits
- understand that your child is not just being "naughty" or "difficult"

Adults

For adults, a diagnosis can help you:

- understand why you might find some things harder than other people
- explain to others why you see and feel the world in a different way
- get support at college, university or work
- get some financial benefits

If you find it hard to get an assessment

It's not always easy to get an autism assessment. Waiting times can also be very long.

If you're finding it hard to get an assessment, you could ask to speak to someone else, like another GP – this is called getting a second opinion.

It may also help to speak to other people who have been in a similar situation.

[Find out about where to get support](#)

Find out more

- [National Autistic Society: diagnosis](#)
- [National Autistic Society: pre-diagnosis – a guide for adults who think they might be autistic](#)
- [Ambitious about Autism: how assessment and diagnosis works in the early years](#)

What happens during an autism assessment

How to get an autism assessment

You need to be referred for an assessment by someone such as a GP or special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) staff at your child's school.

You may have to wait a few months to get an appointment.

[Find out how to get diagnosed](#)

What you can do while you wait for an assessment

If you think you or your child need support at school, home or at work, you can start getting help before having an assessment.

You can:

- ask a GP if the assessment team can suggest any support groups
- ask a GP to refer your child for speech and language therapy
- find a local support group using the [National Autistic Society services directory](#)
- talk to teachers or special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO) staff at your child's school
- speak to student support services at college or university
- speak to your manager or human resources at work
- ask your local council for a [needs assessment](#) to see what support they can recommend

What happens during an autism assessment

You or your child may have 1 or more appointments with a team of different professionals.

For children

The assessment team may:

- ask you about your child's development, such as when they started talking
- watch how you and your child interact, and how your child plays
- read any reports sent by their GP, nursery or school
- ask about their medical history and do a physical examination

A member of the team may also visit your child's school to watch them in class and at break time.

For adults

The assessment team may:

- ask you to fill in a questionnaire about yourself and any problems you have
- speak to someone who knew you as a child to find out about your childhood
- read any reports from the GP about other health problems you may have

Getting the result

When the assessment is finished, you'll be given a report saying what the team found.

You may be given it by the team or get it in the post.

The report will say:

- if you or your child are autistic – it might say something like you "meet the criteria for autism spectrum diagnosis"
- what you or your child might need help with – such as social interaction, communication, behaviours or sensitivity to lights, colours and sounds
- what you or your child are good at

Sometimes the report can be hard to understand as it can be full of terms used by healthcare professionals.

Ask the assessment team if you need any help.

You and your child should also be offered another appointment a few weeks or months later, to talk to someone from the assessment team about the report.

Autism is a lifelong condition, so the report will be used throughout childhood and into adulthood.

If you do not agree with the result

When you get the report, you may:

- be told you or your child are not autistic
- be asked to wait until your child is a bit older to be assessed again, as the signs of autism may not be clear
- be given a diagnosis you do not agree with, such as a learning disability

Ask the assessment team why they have made the diagnosis they have.

The assessment team might arrange for a second opinion from a different team.

If you still do not agree, you can ask the GP to refer you to another team for a second opinion. Or you can pay for another assessment by a professional you choose who works outside the NHS (privately).

Remember that a second opinion may say the same thing.

Find out more

- [Newly diagnosed: things to help](#)
- [National Autistic Society: pre-diagnosis support, a guide for parents and children](#)
- [National Autistic society: pre-diagnosis support, a guide for adults who think they might be autistic](#)
- [Ambitious about Autism: how assessment and diagnosis work in the early years](#)

Newly diagnosed with autism: things to help

Give yourself time

People react to a diagnosis of autism in different ways.

For some, it's a relief to find out why they or their child think, feel and act the way they do. For others, it can be a shock.

Try to give yourself time to come to terms with the diagnosis.

Remember:

- help and support is available
- even if things are hard now, they can get better
- you or your child are still the same person as before
- autism is not an illness or disease with treatments or a "cure"
- autistic people have things they're good at as well as things they need help with

Find help and support services

You might feel alone when you or your child are first diagnosed.

But there are places you can get support.

You can get help from:

- local support groups
- national charities
- other autistic people or parents on social media and forums
- your school, college or workplace
- your local council
- your GP or the autism assessment team that diagnosed you

Find out about support you can get if you're autistic

Listen to other people's stories

Some people find it helpful to find out about other people's stories of autism.

You could also search online for autism blogs, videos or books.

Important

Remember, autism is different for everyone. What happened to other people might not be the same for you or your child.

Look out for other health problems

Autism is not an illness. But many autistic people also have other conditions.

These are not always checked for during an autism assessment.

See a GP if you have any concerns about your or your child's health. They can help you get any extra care you need.

Find out about other conditions that affect autistic people

Find out more about autism

It might help you and your family to find out more about autism.

There can be quite a lot to take in. You do not have to read everything.

You can get trusted information from:

- the NHS – for information about what autism is and advice on autism and everyday life
- National Autistic Society – for autistic children and adults, parents and carers
- Ambitious about Autism – for autistic children and young people, and their families

Autism and everyday life

Find information and advice about living as an autistic person or caring for an autistic child.

How to help your child with day-to-day life

How to help with your child's behaviour

Advice about school

Help for families

Changing from child to adult care

Advice about medicines and medical appointments

Treatments that are not recommended

Other conditions that affect autistic people

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

Symptoms of ADHD include:

- finding it hard to concentrate and getting distracted easily
- acting without thinking
- finding it hard to sit still

People with ADHD may need extra support at school or work. Sometimes they need to take medicine.

Find out more about [ADHD in adults](#) and [ADHD in children and young people](#).

Dyslexia and dyspraxia

Some autistic people have:

- problems with reading, writing and spelling ([dyslexia](#))
- clumsy movements and problems with organisation and following instructions ([developmental co-ordination disorder, or dyspraxia](#))

Extra support at school can often help.

Problems sleeping (insomnia)

Symptoms of insomnia include:

- finding it hard to go to sleep
- waking up several times during the night
- waking up early and not being able to go back to sleep

Changing your bedtime routine can often help.

[Find out more about sleep and autism from the National Autistic Society](#)

Mental health problems

Many autistic people have problems like:

- feeling very worried a lot of the time ([anxiety](#))
- feeling unhappy, irritable or hopeless ([depression](#))
- feeling a need to keep doing certain actions ([obsessive compulsive disorder, or OCD](#))

These conditions can often be treated with talking therapies or medicines.

Learning disabilities

A person with a learning disability may find it hard to:

- understand new or complicated information
- learn new skills
- look after themselves

People with a learning disability often need help with daily life.

[Find out more about learning disabilities](#)

Epilepsy

Symptoms of epilepsy include:

- shaking and collapsing (called a "fit" or seizure)
- staring blankly into space
- strange smells or tastes
- tingling in your arms or legs

Epilepsy can often be treated with medicine.

[Find out more about epilepsy](#)

Problems with joints and other parts of the body

Some autistic people may have:

- flexible or painful joints
- skin that stretches or bruises easily
- diarrhoea or constipation that does not go away

These can be caused by conditions like joint hypermobility syndrome or Ehlers-Danlos syndromes.

You may need support from a range of health professionals, including a physiotherapist.

See a GP if:

you're autistic and think you might have another condition

your child is autistic and you think they might have another condition

you have another condition and think you might be autistic – if you already see a doctor for your other condition, you could speak to them instead

Find out more

- [Advice about medicines and medical appointments](#)

- National Autistic Society: related conditions

Where to get autism support

Friends and family

Telling people close to you about your or your child's autism diagnosis can help them understand how to support you.

They may be able to help with:

- everyday things so you have more time to focus on yourself or your child
- emotional support

National charities and support networks

National Autistic Society

For autistic adults and children, and their families.

- Website: www.autism.org.uk

Ambitious about Autism

For autistic children and young people, their parents and carers.

- Call: 020 8815 5444
- E-mail: info@ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk
- Website: www.ambitiousaboutautism.org.uk

Autism Central

For parents and carers of autistic children, young people and adults.

- Website: www.autismcentral.org.uk

Local support groups

The assessment team that diagnosed you or your child should give you information on local support groups.

You can also search for local groups:

- [National Autistic Society: autism services directory](#)
- [Autism Central: find help](#)

Social media and forums

There are many people with experience of autism offering support and sharing their stories on forums and social media.

You do not have to talk to others in online groups, but it can be helpful to look at what they're saying.

A good place to start is the groups run by autism charities. But bear in mind the NHS does not monitor

Important

Comments on social media and forums are often based on personal experience and should not be taken as advice that would help you or your child.^r these sites.

Facebook

- [National Autistic Society Facebook group](#)
- [Ambitious about Autism Facebook group](#)
- [Actually Autistic for autistic adults](#)
- [Autism Centre of Excellence \(ACE\)](#)

[How to use Facebook if you're new to it.](#)

Forums and communities

- [National Autistic Society Community](#)
- [Autism Support \(HealthUnlocked\)](#)

Your school, college or workplace

You can get support to make things easier for you or your child.

Find out what help is available at:

- nursery or school – speak to teachers or a special educational needs co-ordinator (SENCO)
- college or university – speak to student support services
- work – speak to your manager and human resources (HR)

Your local council

You can get some support and financial benefits from your local council.

What's available depends on your situation.

For children and young people

For people under 25, ask your council about their "local offer".

This is the name for the support they provide for young people with special educational needs.

Every council has to have a local offer.

You can also get advice about the local offer from your local special educational needs advice service.

[Find your nearest information, advice and support \(IAS\) service on the Council for Disabled Children website](#)

For adults

If you're an autistic adult or care for an autistic adult, ask your council for a [needs assessment](#).

This is an assessment to find out:

- what problems you're having with everyday life
- what support or financial benefits you might be able to get

For parents and carers

If you look after someone who's autistic, ask your council for a [carer's assessment](#).

This is an assessment to find out what support or financial benefits you might be able to get to help you care for an autistic person.

GPs and autism assessment teams

If you think you or your child needs help from a health professional, speak to a GP or the assessment team that diagnosed you.

They may be able to refer you to a specialist who can help, such as:

- an occupational therapist
- a speech and language therapist

- a mental health specialist

Easy read information and videos about autism

About autism

- [National Autistic Society: what is autism?](#)
- [National Autistic Society on YouTube: what is autism? video](#)

Medical appointments

- [General Medical Council: going to the doctor \(PDF, 1Mb\)](#)
- [Mencap: telling the doctor you have a learning disability \(PDF, 2.2Mb\)](#)
- [Seeability: having an eye test \(PDF, 1.3Mb\)](#)

Annual health checks

- [Mencap: annual health checks \(PDF, 2.7Mb\)](#)

Going into hospital

- [UCLH: going to hospital](#)
- [Mencap: help in hospital – hospital passports](#)

Autism and your health

Anxiety

- [Mental Health Foundation: easy read guide to anxiety](#)

Tummy problems

- [NHS England: trouble pooing \(constipation\) \(PDF, 764kb\)](#)

Medicines for related conditions

- [EasyHealth: medication leaflets \(you will need to create a free account to download the leaflets\)](#)

Money and financial benefits

- [Department for Work and Pensions: get help from Personal Independence Payment \(PDF, 4.3Mb\)](#)
- [Department for Work and Pensions: how to claim Personal Independence Payment \(PDF, 4.9Mb\)](#)
- [Financial Conduct Authority: easy read guide on everyday banking \(PDF, 886kb\)](#)
- [Mencap: community care needs assessment \(PDF, 492kb\)](#)
- [Mencap: money you can get to pay for help and support \(PDF, 1.3Mb\)](#)

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>