

### Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

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Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex clinical syndrome that usually manifests during the first three years of life and typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. It is characterized by restricted activities and interests, repetitive patterns of behavior, impairments in social interaction, and impairments in communication.<sup>1</sup> There are 700,000 autistic people in the UK - that's more than 1 in 100.<sup>2</sup> In India it is around 1 in 68 children. Autism is 3 times more prevalent in boys than girls (3:1). Signs of autism in girls can present themselves differently and as a result can be misdiagnosed or missed leading to more boys getting a diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>

Autism cannot be cured and most recent research points to there being no single cause for autism. Available scientific evidence suggests that there are probably many factors that make a child more likely to have autism, including environmental and genetic factors.

#### Early Signs of Autism in Infants<sup>3</sup>

In infants, autism symptoms may be difficult to notice as they are not as apparent as in older children. However, there are some early signs that parents and caregivers should be aware of:

1. **Limited Eye Contact:** These infants may avoid eye contact and not engage in 'social smiling' interactions.
2. **Lack of Response to Name:** Infants typically respond to their names being called by the age of 6-9 months. However, lack of response to names being called is one of the most common signs of autism in newborns.
3. **Delayed Speech Development:** A child not cooing or babbling by 12 months of age or not speaking single words by 16 months could be a potential sign of autism.
4. **Limited Gestures:** Autistic infants may show a lack of pointing, waving, or other communicative gestures.

5. **Repetitive Behaviours:** Repetitive movements in infants, like hand-flapping, can be an early indicator of autism.

#### Signs of Autism in Toddlers<sup>3</sup>

During the toddler stage, certain signs of autism may become more evident:

1. **Social Challenges:** Autistic toddlers may find it difficult to engage in interactive play with other babies, preferring solitary activities.
2. **Communication Difficulties:** Delayed or limited speech development, difficulty expressing needs, and trouble understanding language may become more obvious.
3. **Rigidity and Resistance to Change:** Autistic children often show resistance to changes in routines.
4. **Lack of Imaginative Play:** Typical pretend play of toddlers may not be observed or limited in autistic children.
5. **Sensory Sensitivities:** Autistic toddlers might display strong reactions to sensory stimuli, such as certain sounds, textures, or bright lights.

#### Challenges in Early Detection<sup>3</sup>

For a more natural development of a child with autism, early detection is very important. But still there are several challenges in identifying autism in infants and toddlers, like:

1. **Lack of Awareness:** Many parents and caregivers may not be aware of the early signs of autism, leading to delays in seeking a professional evaluation. Parents might even refuse to accept that their child might have ASD. This further might aggravate the ASD symptoms.
2. **Normal Variability:** In early childhood, distinguishing typical variations of normal childhood behavior from potential autism symptoms can be challenging.

## Treatment

There is no fully effective treatment for autism. But the treatment should involve paediatrician, education professional, speech and language therapist, occupational therapist, and educational psychologist.

ASD children are also treated with medication, but little evidence exists indicating significant benefit from most medical treatment. The antipsychotics risperidone and aripiprazole have been demonstrated to reduce hyperactivity, noncompliance, and repetitive behavior, but both medications produce significant side effects including marked weight gain, sedation, and risk of extrapyramidal symptoms.<sup>4</sup>

Evidence is supportive of early intensive behavioral and developmental intervention (EIBI) for improving adaptive behavior, language skills, and cognitive performance in some children. EIBI is a form of Applied Behavior Analysis Treatment (ABA).<sup>5</sup> About 80% of children and adults with autism experience or have experienced mental health problems in their lifetime<sup>1</sup>. Knowing how to spot the signs and get the right support at the right time is crucial in supporting the wellbeing of the individual.

## Conclusion

Early detection and diagnosis of Autism in infants and toddlers are crucial for providing timely interventions and support. As awareness about the early symptoms of autism grows, more children can receive the assistance they need for improved developmental outcomes. Addressing the

challenges in early detection, such as increasing awareness, improving access to diagnostic services, and supporting parents and caregivers, can significantly impact the lives of autistic children and their families.

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