

Introduction to Autism Spectrum Disorder

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an emerging public health challenge bringing to light glaring inequities including disability awareness. ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder that affects roughly 1 in 54 children and more than 5.4 million adults in the United States. Autism has emerged as a major public health concern as recent decades' research shows the initially-believed rarity to be a false perception. The primary symptoms of ASD are social communication challenges, restricted or repetitive behaviors, and sensory sensitivities.

Pima County wants to bring to your attention some resources and knowledge regarding ASD in our communities and work spaces to create more equitable services and inclusion so that individuals can fully participate in our social fabric. Autistic individuals face health equity issues including job access, educational opportunities, housing and healthcare. We hope to inform you about ASD to increase awareness and provide you with the tools to create positive environments and change.

Early Signs of ASD:

- Repetitive behaviors, movements, or phrases
- Lack of response to normal stimuli (their name, visual cues)
- Atypical verbal communication or non-speaking
- Difficulty understanding or expressing feelings
- Avoiding eye contact
- Visit the [CDC's Learn the Signs, Act Early](#) for more information

Know:

- **Sensory Considerations:** Many autistic people experience sensory difficulties including tactile, visual, auditory, taste and smell. Sensory difficulties are often articulated by autistic people in terms of physical pain. A common coping method is stimming (short for self-stimulation) - repeated movements or the repetition of sounds or words to self-regulate and self-soothe.
- **Organization:** Autistic people may be extremely attached to routines. This does not just mean eating lunch at a specific time, but also performing tasks in a specific manner. Routines help to reduce an overwhelming social world. When it comes to change, communication is key.
- **Communication:** Autistic people may have a hard time modulating their tone and maintaining eye contact. Try to focus on the substance and direct meaning of their words. Autistic people are not ignoring you.
- Not all ASD resources were created with all autistic people in mind. Each individual may need different supports and one single therapy does not work for everyone.

Diagnosis:

- ASD is not becoming more common, rather diagnosis is becoming more widely available.
- ASD has frequent co-occurring physical and mental health conditions including: epilepsy (25-40% of people with ASD), sleep disorder, ADHD, gastrointestinal disorders, eating challenges, obesity, anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder.
- Many barriers to diagnosis persist today. ASD is 4.2 times more likely to be diagnosed in boys than in girls and girls are often diagnosed later in life. Other barriers include English proficiency, ability to verbally advocate for self, institutional factors like access to healthcare and provider bias, and cost.

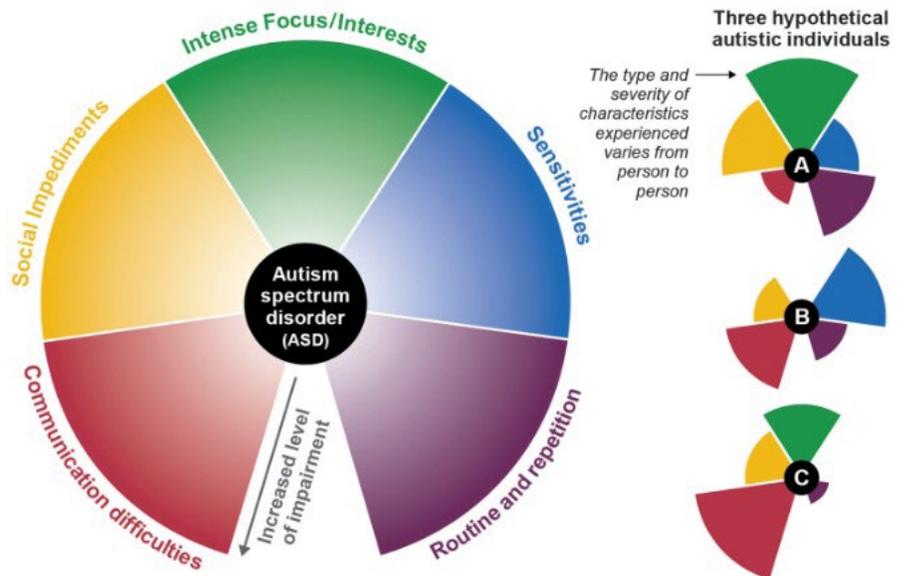


The Spectrum:

- As shown to the right, the spectrum is not linear. This graphical interpretation is based on a number of particular areas, which fluctuate in presence and severity for each individual.

Debunking Common Misconceptions:

- There is no link between ASD and vaccines.
- ASD is not caused by poor parenting or solely environmental factors.
- ASD individuals can experience empathy and emotional connection.
- There is not an “autism epidemic”, a rise in cases can be linked to accessible diagnosis and general heightened awareness.



Source: GAO analysis of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5). | GAO-17-109

Terminology to Avoid:

- **“Normal”** when describing non-autistic individuals
 - ▶ Not autistic. A less-used but correct term is allistic.
- **“We’re all a little autistic”/“You don’t look autistic”**
 - ▶ There is no such thing. This is dismissive of the ASD experience.
- **“High or low functioning”**
 - ▶ These terms judge autistic people according to non-autistic or allistic expectations.
- **“Autism is to be fixed/cured/treated”**
 - ▶ There is nothing wrong with autistic people. They do not need to be fixed, treated or cured.
- **“Nonverbal”**
 - ▶ Non-speaking. Even if autistic people are non-speaking, they have things to communicate.
- **“Person with autism”**
 - ▶ It is preferable to say autistic person unless an autistic person prefers otherwise.
- **“Asperger’s Syndrome”**
 - ▶ Asperger’s Syndrome is no longer an official diagnosis in the DSM-5. This is now considered part of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The term Aspergers has a negative connotation within the community.

Resources:

- Find local therapy options, programs and community support at www.as-az.org.