

What causes Asperger's disorder?

There is no single known cause of Asperger's disorder. Research, however, has pointed to strong evidence of a neurodevelopmental basis, with differences in the brain structure and functioning of individuals with Asperger's disorder being identified.

Factors identified as potential causes of Asperger's disorder include:

- genetic factors (family/hereditary links)
- prenatal factors (e.g. exposure to viral and bacterial diseases)
- physical trauma (e.g. birth injury)

Asperger's disorder is **not** caused by the way a child is parented.

Because varying developmental, neurological and genetic factors are considered to contribute to Asperger's disorder, individuals vary greatly in their presentation.

How is Asperger's disorder diagnosed?

There are no medical or genetic screening tests that can be used to diagnose Asperger's disorder. Diagnosis requires a thorough, multi-disciplinary approach using various standardised diagnostic/assessment tools and clinical rating scales.

The assessment process includes:

- comprehensive clinical interview regarding client's developmental history
- observations across a range of settings (e.g. classroom, playground and home)
- interactions with client
- diagnostic interviews (with parents, teachers, key professionals)
- comparison between information collected and formal diagnostic criteria in international diagnostic manuals (i.e. DSM-IV and ICD-10)



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What is Asperger's disorder?

Asperger's disorder is an autism spectrum disorder. It is the result of dysfunction of certain parts of the brain and nervous system. This dysfunction significantly impairs the way individuals relate to other people, process information, and make sense of their environment.

Individuals with Asperger's disorder show marked impairments in social and communication skills, have unusually strong and narrow interests, and may behave in inflexible and repetitive ways. Many individuals also experience sensory sensitivities (e.g. problems with touch, taste, or smell) and fine and gross motor difficulties (e.g. clumsy and poorly coordinated movements and unusual postures).

Asperger's disorder differs from autistic disorder in that early speech generally develops within normal limits (single words used by age 2 and phrases by age 3). Intellectual abilities are broadly average, though specific strengths and weaknesses are common.

While there is no cure, many individuals make significant progress over time, particularly if learning strengths and individual interests are recognised and nurtured.

What are the key features of Asperger's disorder?

Social impairment

May include difficulties with:

- understanding social situations — may become confused or distressed
- understanding other people's thoughts and feelings (empathy)
- forming and sustaining friendships
- social and imaginative play
- taking part in "small talk"
- initiating and sustaining conversations
- judging social appropriateness of words and actions

Communication impairments

May include:

- limited understanding and use of non-verbal communication (e.g. limited facial expressions and gestures)
- unusual eye contact
- unusual and often monotone vocal qualities
- pedantic, repetitive speech
- monologue rather than dialogue conversational style
- tendency to provide too much or not enough information
- difficulty with non-literal language (e.g. slang, humour, sarcasm)

Restricted and repetitive interests and behaviours

May include:

- unusually strong, intense and narrow interests
- resistance to change; preference for routines
- repetitive themes in stories, art and play

Emotional vulnerability

- risk of anxiety and/or depressive symptomatology
- at times, anxiety may underlie tantrums and aggressive outbursts

Possible cognitive and learning impairments

May include:

- specific learning disabilities despite normal IQ
- poor comprehension relative to vocabulary use
- difficulty with imaginative story writing
- poor organisational and problem solving skills
- problems processing spoken language, especially that which is abstract or complex
- difficulty selecting important from unimportant information, tendency to focus on details; problems seeing the 'big picture'

Common sensory and motor difficulties

May have:

- sensitivity (either over or under sensitive) to taste, touch, sight, smell, sound, temperature and pain
- low muscle tone
- unusual posture
- clumsy or awkward movements
- repetitive motor movements (e.g. finger flicking, hand flapping, rocking and pacing)

Possible areas of special ability

- strong visual learning style
- work well in structured, routine environments
- excellent memory for facts
- expertise in areas of interest
- logical thinkers; may excel in computing, maths and the sciences
- rote learning strengths
- attention to detail and sustained focus in areas of interest