

Asperger's Syndrome

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Milder symptoms and the absence of language and cognitive delays set Asperger's syndrome apart from autism.

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is a condition distinguished by sustained problems with social interaction, social relatedness and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of interests, activities and behaviours.

It is one of five conditions – including autism, Rett syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder and PDD-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) – that fall under the umbrella category of pervasive developmental disorders (PDD). The latter is characterised by impairment in social interaction, verbal and non-verbal communication skills, as well as limited or repetitive interests and activities.

Of these, three conditions share such similarities that they reflect different levels of severity along the same disorder spectrum:

- Commonly manifested in restricted, repetitive or stereotyped behavioural patterns, **autism** seriously affects verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the ability to relate to others.
- **Asperger's syndrome** is a milder variant of autism marked by social deficits and certain unusual behavioural patterns, but without significant delays in overall intelligence, cognitive or language development.
- **PDD-NOS** applies to children who do not fit completely into either of the above two categories but possess sufficient symptoms diagnosed under the spectrum.

Prevalence and Causes

Findings on the prevalence of AS are diverse. Some studies indicate that two out of every 10,000 children have AS in the United States, while others place the estimate at three to four in 1,000.

So far, brain imaging studies conducted on AS cases have found neither consistent patterns nor particular locations of any type

of lesions. In addition, associated medical conditions such as fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, neurofibromatosis and hypothyroidism are less common in AS than in autism. This may imply fewer major physical brain problems associated with AS than with autism.

Although specific risk factors and causes remain unidentified, the incidence of AS is noted to be higher in boys than girls, and siblings of affected children. The latter infers a genetic origin for the condition.

Symptoms and Diagnosis

As most affected kids have average or above average intelligence, the disorder may not become apparent until later or in social settings, even though symptoms can surface as early as the age of three.

Predominant traits aside, AS characteristics can vary greatly among individuals. As such, children with the disorder can have a unique set of symptoms that combines any of the following to various degrees:

- Above average memory skills
- Average or above average vocabulary skills
- Awkward, repetitive gestures, body postures or facial expressions
- Below average handwriting
- Difficulty understanding their feelings
- Extreme difficulty with peer relationships and social situations
- Inability to be empathetic
- Inability to read non-verbal social cues and other people's feelings
- Late development of motor skills or lack of physical coordination
- Obsessive interest in a particular topic
- Strong attachment to routine
- Strong aversion to change or spontaneity
- Unusual sensitivity to sound, light or touch
- Unusual speech patterns with

regard to tone, pitch or accent

Kids who are suspected of having the disorder should first see a paediatrician to rule out other conditions that may be causing the symptoms. In the absence of a physical cause, they are then referred to specialists in childhood developmental disorders.

It is important to note that clinicians who overlook other symptoms of AS tend to diagnose these children as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) because many kids with PDD also meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD. Therefore, ADHD should not be co-diagnosed with AS.



Intervention Techniques

- **Social skills** - Children with AS generally have difficulties recognising both verbal and non-verbal cues. Social behaviour and skills, like gauging the extent of personal space and when to end a conversation, are usually lacking as a result. A good training programme in social skills uses clear explanations, illustrations and sufficient repetition. Additional assistance can be sought from a qualified behavioural therapist.
- **Sensory sensitivity** - Children who are overly sensitive to noise, light or touch can manage their conditions better with the help of a behavioural therapist.
- **Motor skills and physical coordination** - Some kids may experience difficulties or delays in developing physical coordination or motor skills. An occupational therapist can help them improve

their fine and gross motor skills.

- **Speech and language issues** - Children who have difficulties with the volume, rhythm, stress patterns and intonation of their speech, as well as other pragmatic functions of communication, will benefit from the intervention of a speech and language therapist.
- **Learning programmes** - Most children with AS learn more effectively under an individualised education plan and suitable modifications in school. The above-mentioned therapists can offer useful advice on how to go about seeking and arranging such special services with the school.
It is crucial for kids with AS to be

monitored regularly in their social skills and mental health development. Parents need to communicate with teachers to ensure that the child is receiving appropriate services and making adequate progress in school. Parents and caregivers themselves can also benefit from training or counselling services provided by psychotherapists skilled in childhood developmental issues.

The prognosis for children with AS varies greatly and is strongly influenced by early diagnosis and effective intervention. With early intervention and specialised training to help manage the challenges, they can grow to lead happy, productive and healthy lives.

Sources:

- *Neurology Channel* (www.neurologychannel.com)
- *The Encyclopedia of the Brain and Brain Disorders, Third Edition*
- *The Encyclopedia of Learning Disabilities, Second Edition*

