

Autism: Asperger's syndrome

What is Asperger's syndrome?

Also known as high-functioning autism, *Asperger's syndrome* is one of the autism spectrum disorders which presents in childhood with impairments in social interaction and a restricted range of interests and activities. More boys than girls are diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. It is a developmental disability and is due to a difference in the way the brain develops, leading to particular difficulties in processing certain types of information. People with Asperger's syndrome can learn social rules and behaviours and so minimise or reduce their disability, but their fundamental difficulties tend to persist throughout life.

What are the typical features?

People with Asperger's syndrome may have difficulty:

- understanding the rules of social behaviour and communication (e.g. how to greet someone appropriately and take turns in conversations)
- 'reading' the facial expressions and body language of others (e.g. noticing the signs that someone is bored, happy or sad)
- understanding metaphor, common expressions, sarcasm or irony. They tend to interpret language in very concrete and literal ways (e.g. when told to 'pull up their socks', they will look down at their feet and wonder what to do with their clothing)
- forming friendships with peers.

They also:

- have a restricted range of interests and activities, and tend to have a detailed knowledge of these narrow areas (e.g. knowing all about dinosaurs, trains, bus timetables or weather patterns)
- have fixed rigid rituals and routines that they follow and become extremely distressed if not able to do so (e.g. bed time routines, having coffee in the same cafe each morning).

What social difficulties do they have?

People with Asperger's syndrome usually want to have friends and be part of social networks, but their difficulties in knowing how to behave appropriately and in reading the emotions and responses of others often lead to teasing, bullying, exploitation, ostracism and social isolation.

The narrow focus of their interests, and their desire to discuss these interests at length with little understanding of how others are responding, can lead to avoidance or rejection by others.

Their distress at interruption of their routines and rituals can lead to outbursts of anger that may seem unpredictable and unwarranted to others.

What communication difficulties do they have?

There is usually no significant delay in the child developing speech and many will have quite advanced verbal abilities for their age. There can, however, be limitations in how much they understand of the content and implications of what they say. They have difficulty comprehending and manipulating abstract concepts and the abstract use of language, for example in idiom, metaphor, humour and sarcasm. They may also be unaware of, or confused by, the complex interplay of language content, tone of voice, facial expression, body language and social context that comprise a communication message, and so may misinterpret what is said or be misunderstood by others.

What is their intellectual ability?

People with Asperger's syndrome generally have normal intellectual ability. There are particular patterns seen on psychometric testing that help in making a diagnosis. They usually demonstrate an ability to memorise organised data but do not have good powers of imagination.

How is it diagnosed?

There are no specific blood or imaging tests. The diagnosis is made after assessment and testing by skilled paediatricians, psychiatrists or psychologists.

What is the cause?

The precise cause of Asperger's syndrome is not known, but genetic causes are thought to be most likely in the majority of cases. No specific genetic markers have yet been found.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure for Asperger's syndrome, but there is much that can be done to help the child or adult and their family. A diagnosis leads to understanding and facilitates access to support groups and further sources of information. The basis of intervention is helping the person and their family and friends understand their difficulties, and to explicitly teach specific social rules, behaviours and skills as required.

› FURTHER INFORMATION

- Autism Spectrum Australia: <http://www.aspect.org.au>
- Dr Tony Attwood has written articles, presentations and books on Asperger's syndrome: www.tonyattwood.com.au
- Victorian Government Disability Online information: www.disability.vic.gov.au
- Victorian Asperger Syndrome Support Network: <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~asperger>