

A guide to autism

What is autism?

Autism, also known as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), is a neurodevelopmental condition that describes how a person's brain functions and how their body experiences and interacts with the world. Autistic people may experience differences in communication and social understanding, motor coordination, sensory processing, and executive functioning (such as planning and organisation).

Autism often co-occurs with other conditions such as ADHD, dyspraxia, sensory processing differences (SPD), tics, anxiety, and feeding or eating difficulties. When autism goes unrecognised, life can feel confusing, overwhelming, and stressful. Girls and women often become skilled at masking their challenges, which can delay diagnosis and increase the risk of mental health difficulties during adolescence and adulthood as social demands become more complex.

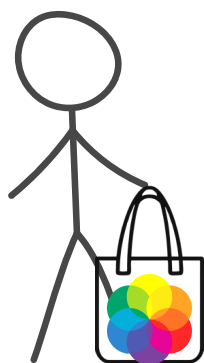
Every autistic person is unique, with their own strengths, talents, and interests. When we take time to understand, support, and empower autistic individuals, they can learn to recognise their needs, develop effective self-regulation strategies, and thrive confidently alongside their peers, realising their full potential and achieving great things.



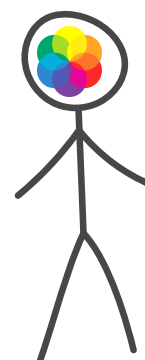
Language and symbols around autism

A 2015 study found no single preferred term for autism. Many in the autism community prefer the term "autistic person", as it embraces autism as an integral part of their identity rather than something separate. However, about half of professionals favoured "person with autism." The term 'Asperger' has become controversial in recent years. Hans Asperger, the Austrian paediatrician after whom it is named, was never a member of the Nazi Party, but research has shown that he played a role in identifying children with disabilities. These children were sent to a children's ward in Vienna, where many were euthanised or subjected to experiments as part of the Nazi eugenics program. Asperger believed that children on the 'favourable' side of the autistic spectrum could be supported to achieve social integration and be recognised for their abilities. They all received quality care. In contrast, those he described as 'severely autistic' were considered unfit to live and faced the threat of euthanasia.

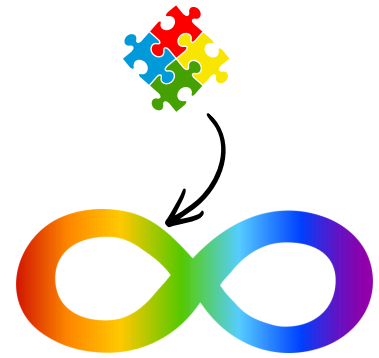
Person with autism



Autistic person



The puzzle piece is one of the most widely recognised symbols for autism. The symbol was designed to represent the complexity and mystery surrounding autism at a time when the condition was still relatively unknown. In recent years, however, the puzzle piece as a symbol for autism has become a controversial topic. It has been argued that the puzzle piece promotes the mentality that autistic people are incomplete or are missing pieces, and it treats autism as a disease that needs to be 'treated' or 'cured'. More recently, the rainbow infinity symbol represents the full diversity of autism and other neurodivergent conditions. The rainbow infinity symbol was adopted for neurodiversity in the 2000s/2010s (Judy Singer coined neurodiversity in the late 1990s, but the rainbow infinity emerged later) to reflect variation, inclusion, and acceptance of all strengths and challenges within the neurodiverse community.



The key is to use the language each individual prefers, and embrace their choice of symbols.

Traits of autism

- Social interaction: autistic people may seem uninterested in socialising, or may want to connect but find it difficult. Their responses can appear unusual or repetitive, which can make friendships challenging and social interaction tiring.
- Social communication: autistic people may experience difficulties with both verbal and non-verbal communication. This can range from not speaking at all to having extensive but sometimes repetitive vocabulary, with challenges in using language socially. Understanding jokes, turn-taking, gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, or emotions in themselves and others can be difficult and may lead to anxiety.
- Inflexibility: autistic people often prefer sameness, repetition, and routine. Changes can cause anxiety or distress. This may show in play (lining up toys or focusing on details) or through stimming - repetitive movements or sounds (like rocking, flapping, or humming) used to express, soothe, or cope.
- Sensory processing: autistic people often experience differences in how they process sensory information. They may be overly sensitive or less responsive to sounds, lights, textures, tastes, or smells, and may either avoid or seek sensory input. This can appear as anything from withdrawal to hyperactivity.



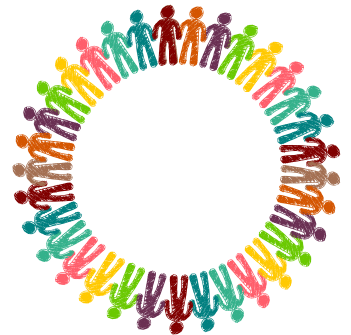
What causes autism?



Research suggests that autism has a genetic basis, with multiple genes likely involved rather than a single cause. It is not the result of emotional deprivation or upbringing. Extensive studies have also confirmed that there is no link between autism and vaccines.

How to support an autistic person in your unit

- Educate yourself about ASD and access [further support](#)
- Use patience and understanding to help every person celebrate their differences and develop a positive relationship with neurodiversity.
- Recognise that the world can be overwhelming or confusing for someone with ASD.
- Try and use clear consistent language so they understand what you mean.



Help prevent meltdowns and dysregulation by:

- Understanding their perspective and identifying areas of difficulty by using an [adjustment plan](#), [communication passport](#) and [wellbeing plan](#)
- Incorporating [visual aids](#)
- Encouraging the use of aids like earbuds and fidget toys
- Create a safe space they can go if they need a sensory break
- Allowing for uniform adjustments
- Try and allow as much notice as possible if plans are going change
- Adjusting the environment to reduce stress (such as minimising noise, or bright lights)
- Keep yourself calm and regulated, as this increases the likelihood of a positive and effective response.

Access [further support](#) if needed.

Remember you can get help with the costs for inclusive materials and resources. This may be available in your country and region, or with the [accessible guiding grant](#) from HQ.

Useful contacts



National
Autistic
Society

autism.org.uk