

Has my next patient got an autism spectrum disorder?

Signs that a child might have an ASD

- Delayed speech in some, but not all
- Social avoidance of adults and children
- Lack of shared attention
- One-sided conversation
- Unusual eye contact
- Unusual sensory responses
- Others describe child as anti-social, or remote, or naughty, or self-centred or odd

Signs that an adult might have an ASD

- Social isolation, anxiety or depression
- Lifelong difficulties, particularly in relation to the social aspects of life and employment
- Unusual conversational style, tone, content and eye contact
- Rigidity of thought and behaviour
- Strong special interests
- Unusual sensory responses

Some facts about ASD

- Those with ASD are often misdiagnosed/labelled as naughty, challenging, loners, eccentric, little professors, emotionally disturbed.
- Parents can be blamed for their child's apparent anti-social behaviour before diagnosis which adds to their distress.
- ASDs are developmental disorders with a genetic component and more than one person in the immediate or extended family might have an ASD.
- Inadequate parenting or neglect does not cause ASD.
- There are brain differences in structure, function and processing which are being researched.
- ASDs are classified as pervasive developmental disorders.
- Symptoms are present before the age of 36 months, but on average ASDs are not diagnosed until the age of 5 years, or for some individuals, until adolescence or adulthood.
- Those with ASD span the entire ability range from well above average intelligence (eg Asperger syndrome and high functioning autism) to those with severe learning difficulties.
- Those with ASD can have other disorders, in particular epilepsy, additional learning difficulties, visual and hearing loss and Down syndrome, for example.

How might a suspected ASD diagnosis be explored?

- There are no medical tests to confirm the diagnosis.
- A full developmental history is needed.
- An ASD screening or diagnostic tool might be completed.
- The child/adult is observed across settings, alone and with others, and/or in specially set up situations.
- Referral made to the local specialist, assessment team.

Screening and diagnostic methods

- Based on observation of current behaviours and data on early childhood development.
 - Criteria listed within

International Classification of Diseases - 10 and Diagnostic and Statistical Manual - IV-TR.

- Multi-agency assessment recommended.
- Interview with parents and reports from others essential.
- Variety of screening and diagnostic instruments have been developed to aid diagnosis.

Screening tools include

- CHAT (Checklist for Autism in Toddlers).
- CAST (Childhood Asperger Syndrome Test).

Diagnostic tools include:

DISCO (Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders); 3Di; ADI-R (Autism Diagnostic Interview - Revised); ASDI (Asperger Syndrome Diagnostic Interview); ADOS (Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule).

Key areas to assess

- Development in the first 36 months of life.
- Social interaction with family members and peers.
- Communication and language skills.
- Play and leisure pursuits.
- Educational history and attainments.
- Employment history.
- Current everyday functioning and independence skills.
- Current needs of the family and the individual.

Potential benefits of diagnosis

- Enables access to appropriate interventions, services and literature.
- Provides an explanation for the behaviours, and often relief, to parents/professionals and the individual with ASD.

References

Gillberg, C. and Coleman, M. (2002) *The biology of autistic syndromes*, 2nd edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Howlin, P. and Moore, A. (1997) *Diagnosis in autism: a survey of 1200 patients*, *Autism: International Journal of Research and Practice*, 1, 2, 135-162

Medical Research Council (2001) *Review of autism research: epidemiology and causes*, London: MRC

NIASA (2003) *National Autism Plan for Children (NAPC) Plan for the identification, assessment and diagnosis for children with ASDs*, London: National Autistic Society

Want to Know More?

The University of Birmingham and NHS Scotland have developed a specialist, online learning resource on ASD, designed for GPs and Primary Care Practitioners, where you will find more detailed information on:

The Patient with an ASD
Practical Strategies
Health Issues
Diagnostic Issues

The content of this leaflet was provided by the Autism Team at the University of Birmingham.

www.nes.scot.nhs.uk/asd