

Autism Spectrum Disorder



Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a disability that occurs in the brain during pregnancy. The symptoms of autism are only noticeable within the first three years of a child's life and they vary from child to child.

In South Africa, it is estimated that 2% or 1 in 36 children are autistic.



Here are some risk factors that can lead to children developing ASD:

parents who are older when they fall pregnant

mothers who are diabetic or obese during pregnancy

having other genetic conditions, such as Down's syndrome



parents who are exposed to air pollution, heavy metals or some pesticides

having a sibling with ASD

very low birth weight

People with ASD struggle with socialising, communicating and interacting with others. You often find that they may have different ways of learning, paying attention and moving their bodies.

Characteristics of children with ASD

Parents of young children are usually the first to notice the characteristics of ASD as their little ones grow and develop. These symptoms include:

- not maintaining eye contact, especially during feeds
- not showing facial expressions to portray happiness, sadness or anger
- showing no interest in joining other playing children
- not engaging in simple play with parents or siblings
- not sharing any of their interests such as toys or TV programmes
- not noticing when others are hurt or upset
- insisting on the same daily routines
- showing preference to specific toys/objects



If you notice some of these symptoms, it is important to address these with your doctor so that a proper assessment and diagnosis can take place.

Treatment of ASD

The severity of ASD differs for every child. Some children may require a lot of care and support while others may only struggle with one or two things. Rehabilitation and care should always be tailored to each child and the treatment goals usually include the following:

- 1 improved communication skills
- 2 improved adaptive skills
- 3 improved social interactions and play skills
- 4 decrease in negative behaviours
- 5 promoting academic function and learning



Other treatment interventions

Early childhood is the best time to start behavioural and educational interventions for children with special needs.

Occupational therapy focuses more on play and physical movement as the mode of therapy, and in some instances, medication may also be necessary. These services are available in both the public and private health sectors. As children grow, these support programmes are also available in schools that cater to children with special needs.

Social support grants are available and can be applied for.



Can children with ASD lead normal lives?

Long-term outcomes differ for everyone. In some populations, most people with ASD do find jobs and can maintain social relationships such as friendships and intimate relationships. They are also able to have their own families.

Let's make this year one in which we connect with the right information!