

# AUTISM AWARENESS MONTH

**April is Autism Awareness Month. Join us as we  
#CelebrateDifferences**

## Did You Know?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)—or Autism—is a broad term used to describe a group of neurodevelopmental conditions typically characterized by differences in communication and social interaction.

April is National Autism Awareness Month and aims to help you learn more about the fastest-growing developmental disorder in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 36 children has autism. Today, autism is usually diagnosed in early childhood. Early diagnosis can improve the quality of life for those with autism and positively impact their careers and relationships.

- About every 20 minutes, someone in the world is diagnosed with autism
- Autistic individuals (verbal and non-verbal) use a variety of different and unique ways to communicate
- People with autism have a range of very special gifts and talents!



## Screening & Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Diagnosing autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be difficult because there is no medical test, like a blood test, to diagnose the disorder. Doctors look at the child's developmental history and behavior to make a diagnosis.

ASD can sometimes be detected at 18 months or younger. By age 2, a diagnosis by an experienced professional can be considered very reliable. However, many children do not receive a final diagnosis until much older. Some people are not diagnosed until they are adolescents or adults. This delay means that children with ASD might not get the early help they need.

Early signs of ASD can include, but are not limited to

- Avoiding eye contact,
- Having little interest in other children or caretakers,
- Limited display of language (for example, having fewer words than peers or difficulty with use of words for communication), or
- Getting upset by minor changes in routine.

CDC's "Learn the Signs. Act Early." program provides free resources to help families monitor developmental milestones and recognize signs of developmental concerns, including ASD.

As children with ASD become adolescents and young adults, they might have difficulties developing and maintaining friendships, communicating with peers and adults, or understanding what behaviors are expected in school or on the job. They may also come to the attention of healthcare providers because they have co-occurring conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anxiety or depression, or conduct disorder.

Monitoring, screening, evaluating, and diagnosing children with ASD as early as possible is important to make sure children receive the services and support they need to reach their full potential. There are several steps in this process.

## Autism and sensory issues

People with autism might have sensitivities to:

- Sights
- Sounds
- Smells
- Tastes
- Touch
- Balance (vestibular)
- Awareness of body position and movement (proprioception)
- Awareness of internal body cues and sensations (interoception)

Autistic people can experience both hypersensitivity (over-responsiveness) and hyposensitivity (under-responsiveness) to a wide range of stimuli. Most people have a combination of both.

Many autistic people experience hypersensitivity to bright lights or certain light wavelengths (e.g., LED or fluorescent lights). Certain sounds, smells, textures and tastes can also be overwhelming. This can result in sensory avoidance – trying to get away from stimuli that most people can easily tune out. Sensory avoidance can look like pulling away from physical touch, covering the ears to avoid loud or unpredictable sounds, or avoiding certain kinds of clothing.

Hyposensitivity is also common. This can look like a constant need for movement; difficulty recognizing sensations like hunger, illness or pain; or attraction to loud noises, bright lights and vibrant colors. People who are hyposensitive may engage in sensory seeking to get more sensory input from the environment. For example, people with autism may stimulate their senses by making loud noises, touching people or objects, or rocking back and forth.

### What do sensory issues feel like?

Having unique sensitivities to certain types of sensory input can create challenges in everyday situations like school, work or community settings. For someone who is hypersensitive, it can take a lot of effort to spend all day under LED or fluorescent lights, navigate a crowded space or process conversations in rooms with background noise. This can be incredibly physically and emotionally draining and can leave the person feeling too exhausted to do other important tasks.

Many autistic people use stimming as a form of sensory seeking to keep their sensory systems in balance. Repetitive movements, sounds, or fidgeting can help people with autism stay calm, relieve stress or block out uncomfortable sensory input. However, constant movement can sometimes seem inappropriate or disruptive in certain settings (like the workplace), so autistic people often feel like they need to suppress their stimming. When this happens, it becomes more and more difficult to self-regulate, leading to sensory overload, exhaustion or burnout.

Sensory overload happens when an intense sensory stimulus overwhelms your ability to cope. This can be triggered by a single event, like an unexpected loud noise, or it can build up over time due to the effort it takes to cope with sensory sensitivities in daily life. Sensory overload can feel like intense anxiety, a need to escape the situation or difficulty communicating. When the brain has to put all of its resources into sensory processing, it can shut off other functions, like speech, decision making and information processing.

### What do sensory issues look like?

Many people with autism show certain behaviors when they are experiencing a sensory issue:

- Increased movement, such as jumping, spinning or crashing into things
- Increased stimming, such as hand flapping, making repetitive noises or rocking back and forth
- Talking faster and louder, or not talking at all
- Covering ears or eyes
- Difficulty recognizing internal sensations like hunger, pain or the need to use the bathroom
- Refusing or insisting on certain foods or clothing items
- Frequent chewing on non-food items
- Frequent touching of others or playing rough
- Difficulty communicating or responding as the brain shifts resources to deal with sensory input (shutdown)
- Escalating, overwhelming emotions or need to escape a situation (meltdown)

### Accommodations for sensory issues

Understanding and accommodating sensory issues can ease discomfort and increase opportunities for autistic people to learn, socialize, communicate and participate in the community. Accommodations might mean modifying the environment, using tools and strategies, or creating new habits or routines. Since sensory needs depend the environment, accommodations may need to be adapted for each setting.

Examples of accommodations for hypersensitivity:

- Using light covers, sunglasses or a hat under fluorescent lights
- Wearing ear plugs or headphones in noisy environments

- Working in spaces with a closed door or high walls
- Avoiding strongly scented products
- Choosing foods that avoid aversions to textures, temperatures or spices
- Wearing soft, comfortable clothing
- Adjusting schedules to avoid crowds

Examples of accommodations for hyposensitivity:

- Visual supports for those who have difficulty processing spoken information
- Using fidget toys, chewies and other sensory tools
- Arranging furniture to provide safe, open spaces
- Taking frequent movement breaks throughout the day
- Eating foods with strong flavors or mixed textures
- Weighted blankets, lap pads or clothing that provides deep pressure

Autistic people have the right to ask for reasonable accommodations at work and school.

[Click to learn more](#)

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## Jokes of the Month

Did you hear about the goats that got in trouble for playing pranks on April Fools'?

*It turned out to be a couple of kids.*

How do birds know how to fly north in the spring?

*They wing it.*

How do you keep a fool in suspense?

*I'll tell you the answer tomorrow.*



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