

People with autism are people first



**Issued on the Occasion of World Autism Awareness Day
2 April 2009**

People with autism are people first

About autism

Autism (or autism spectrum disorder, ASD, as it is referred to medically) is a complex neurodevelopmental disability which affects normal brain function. Autism usually manifests during the first three years of a person's life.

Autism has a wide spectrum of presentation, so no two people with autism will have exactly the same symptoms. In addition, the symptoms can vary in severity from mild to severe. People with autism have difficulty with communication along with a wide range of social activities and interactions. A person with ASD will usually prefer to repetitively perform a set of behaviours and will resist any major (or even minor) changes to daily routine.

Sex ratio

Autism is four times more likely to affect males than females.

Social interaction

A person with ASD interacts with others in ways which are quite different when compared to the rest of the population. In less severe instances, the person with autism may seem socially clumsy, sometimes inappropriate in his/her behavior. If the symptoms are more severe, the person may appear to be fully involved only with himself/herself, and unresponsive to the environment.



Sometimes, but not always, people with autism may make very little eye contact. As care providers are increasingly more able to detect signs of autism early, eye contact among people with autism may improve with repeated reminders and practice.

It may not always be possible to have a meaningful conversation with a person with ASD, in terms of exchange of ideas, thoughts, suggestions and feelings.

Understanding of social limits and social conventions, despite repeated reminders from parents, may continue to be weak.

They may also lack the social skills necessary in forming friendships with their peer group.

Many inappropriate behaviors like temper tantrums may actually be means

of communication.

Physical touch

While some, children with ASD may not like being cuddled, hugged or being touched like other children do, others will enjoy being hugged by familiar persons, like parents, grandparents siblings and other close relatives.



Repetitive behaviours

Persons with ASD like predictability and routine. Performing the same activities over and over again is commonly observed. These repetitive behaviours, like continuous flapping of hands, may appear to be bizarre and ritualistic, to others.

Children with autism are often fascinated by spinning wheels, cycle tyres and other rotatory movements.

Expressive language

This is usually a major area of concern. Some children with autism do not speak at all, while some will automatically repeat words or phrases that they are spoken to - a phenomenon called echolalia.

Compared to other people's speech, the speech of a person with ASD may sound much more formal and flat.

Uneven development

A child with ASD may not develop harmoniously, or at the same rate in all areas of skill development. Cognitive development may take place rapidly as compared to social skills. There is usually an uneven pattern in skill development across major domains.

Learning is also uneven

It is difficult to predict how well or how quickly a child with ASD will learn. Some difficult things may be learned first before the more simple ones.

Understanding the feelings of others

A person with Autism will find it difficult to understand the feelings of others. His/her ability to instinctively understand that other people may have different feelings about the same subject, is much weaker. However, if they are frequently reminded of this, the ability to comprehend other people's feelings, usually improves.

Lights, sounds and smells



Usually, persons with ASD will get upset and perturbed by sudden loud noises, some smells and changes in lighting and temperature. It could be the result of the surprise element rather than the sound itself. If information regarding impending change is provided, then they are able to cope with it better.

Associated difficulties

There may be associated difficulties like mental retardation, hyperactivity, sensory impairment, emotional and behavioural disorders, specific language impairment and epilepsy.

Tics

Sometimes though not often, people with ASD may display motor tics (involuntary jerky movements), which may be complicated, uncontrollable, of long duration and quite disturbing for parents and others to observe.

Estimated prevalence of autism

Studies in the United States during the 1990s have estimated prevalence rates of autism to be 2.0--7.0 per 1,000 children, an over tenfold increase compared to the 1980s. This suggests that autism is being identified and diagnosed much more in the community in recent years.

Early detection and early intervention

It is important to identify children with autism at an early age so that appropriate, structured and multi disciplinary interventions can be made available for better developmental outcomes.

References

- 1 "The Doctors Handbook on Disability"
by Dr A. Mervyn Fox., Published by the Spastics Society of Tamilnadu, India.
- 2 "An Introduction to the Neurodevelopmental Disorders of Children"
by Dr. A. Mervyn Fox., Published by the National Trust, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment Government of India.
- 3 "Beyond Tokenism"
publication of The National Trust, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India.
- 4 "Autism Spectrum Disorders, a guidebook for Paediatricians in India"
by Action For Autism , New Delhi (currently in draft format).
- 5 Information downloaded from the following Web sites on 31 March 2009
www.worldautismawarenessday.org
www.autismspeaks.org
www.medicalnewstoday.com
www.autismsymptoms1.com
www.en.wikipedia.org
www.autismspeaks.org



Acknowledgments

Pictures provided by Action for Autism.

People with Autism are people first

Mental Health and Substance Abuse
Department of Noncommunicable Diseases and Mental Health