

# Autism

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that affects communication and behavior. Although autism can be diagnosed at any age, it is said to be a “developmental disorder” because symptoms generally appear in the first two years of life.

As noted in the DSM-5 of the APA, A person with ASD will exhibit:

- Problems communicating interacting with others
- Limited interests
- Repetitive behaviors
- Symptoms which impair a person’s ability to function in school, work and other areas of life

There is a wide range of symptoms and severity from one person to another diagnosed with autism, and the disorder is noted in all ethnic, racial and economic groups. Early diagnosis and treatment can improve a person’s symptoms and level of functioning, therefore the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children be screened for autism at their 18 and 24 month well child check-ups with ongoing monitoring throughout childhood. Children with autism often have high intellect so symptoms of ASD sometimes are not evident until the child is in school and the social deficiencies become more apparent. Providers should refer for specialized services and treatment at the time of diagnosis to ensure early intervention.

- Symptoms include but are not limited to:
  - Making little or inconsistent eye contact
  - Tending not to look at or listen to people
  - Lack of exhibiting enjoyment in activities
  - Not responding when called
  - Difficulties with the back and forth of conversation
  - Failure to notice social cues in others (e.g., boredom, anger, disinterest)
  - Facial expressions, movements, and gestures do not match what is being said
  - Monotone or robotic tone of voice
  - Inability to understand or predict other people’s actions
  - Repeating behaviors, words or phrases
  - Focused interests, such as with moving objects or parts of objects
  - Upset by slight changes in a routine
  - Sensitivity to sensory input such as light, noise, smells, clothing or temperature

## Humana Healthy Horizons® in Oklahoma

Humana Healthy Horizons in Oklahoma is a Medicaid product of Humana Wisconsin Health Organization Insurance Corporation.

Despite these challenges, individuals diagnosed with ASD are often noted to have strengths in the following areas:

- Being able to learn things in detail
- High ability to remember information for long periods of time
- Being strong visual and auditory learners
- Excelling in math, science, music, or art

## Screening tools

The following are examples of tools to screen for a possible Autism Spectrum Disorder.

- Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers – Revised with follow-up (M-CHAT-R/F) – This is the most common screening tool used in pediatric offices and is the preferred tool for the American Academy of Pediatrics. It is a 23-point questionnaire completed by the parent/caregiver and assists with identifying early concerns about language delay, behaviors, and additional developmental risks which may need further evaluation and testing.
- Ages and Stages Questionnaires SE-2 (ASQ-SE2) – This questionnaire screens for social-emotional issues for children through 6 years of age. This instrument screens in seven key social-emotional areas: self-regulation, compliance, adaptive functioning, autonomy, affect, social-communication and interaction with people.
- Communication and Symbolic Behavior Scales (CSBS) – Designed to assess infants, toddlers and preschoolers at risk of communication delays. The scale measures the following seven language predictors: 1) emotion and use of eye gaze, 2) use of communication, 3) use of gestures, 4) use of sounds, 5) use of words, 6) understanding of words, and 7) use of objects.

## Treatment

Since ASD is a developmental disorder, developmental delays may be observed prior to receiving the diagnosis of ASD. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that specialized services and full evaluation begin as soon as the delays are noted.

Specialists who can evaluate for ASD include:

- Developmental-behavioral pediatrician
- Neurodevelopmental pediatrician
- Neurologist
- Psychiatrist
- Psychologist

Treatment / Services that may be recommended for the child, may include:

- Speech therapy
- Occupational therapy
- Physical therapy
- Behavioral Training/Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA)
- Social skills training
- Respite care
- Inclusive leisure activities
- Individual education plan for school based services

Since autism is a chronic condition that continues throughout the lifespan, a collaborative approach is recommended. Providers should be prepared to participate in multi-disciplinary teams on behalf of the child, provide education to parents/caregivers, and assist with referrals for services as identified. Providers should screen for and educate on co-occurring conditions including but not limited to:

- Sleep disorders
- Feeding problems
- Obesity
- Seizures
- Adhd
- Anxiety

## **Additional Resources**

The following websites contain additional information for parents/caregivers as well as providers

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) - <https://www.aap.org/en-us/Pages/Default.aspx>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/index.html>

National Autism Association - <https://nationalautismassociation.org/>

National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) - <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

## **Clinical Practice Guidelines**

Clinical Practice Guidelines for Autism Spectrum Disorder

January, 2019, NIH, National Library of Medicine

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6345133/>

Executive Summary: Identification, Evaluation, and Management of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder January, 2020, American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)