

What is Asperger Syndrome?

Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism. The Autism Society of Canada describes Asperger's as a neurobiological disorder that results in mild to severe impairments in social interaction and understanding. While language and cognitive development is not delayed, there may be deficits in communication and some restricted and repetitive activities and interests. The disorder is named for Hans Asperger, a pediatrician from Vienna, who first wrote about this cluster of characteristics as early as 1944.

Organizations that support people living with Autism Spectrum Disorders caution each individual is unique - no one person with autism responds or behaves exactly like another with the same diagnosis. For more information on Asperger Syndrome and other Autism Spectrum Disorders visit the Autism Society of Canada at www.autismsocietycanada.ca

How common is Asperger Syndrome?

The Autism Society of Canada suggests 5 in 10,000 Canadians have Asperger Syndrome. Asperger's is one of five Autism Spectrum Disorders described under the diagnostic category of Pervasive Developmental Disorders that appear in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) of the American Psychiatric Association. Autism is the most common neurological disorder affecting children and one of the most common developmental disabilities affecting Canadians. Autism Spectrum Disorders change the way the brain processes information and can affect all aspects of a person's development. Autism is four times more common in boys than girls.

Common Traits of People with Asperger Syndrome

Social/Communication Traits

- Despite a desire for friends, difficulty in initiating or maintaining close relationships
- Problems reading non-verbal or social cues or understanding/using social rules
- Very socially naïve and as a result are often taken advantage of, rejected, or bullied
- Social contact may be directed by them (e.g. play is "on their terms" or not at all)
- Poor or intense eye contact, atypical use of gestures and flat or inappropriate facial expressions
- One-sided conversations, and little ability for "small talk"
- May appear overly shy or overly extroverted, but inappropriately so
- Unaware of others' thoughts, feelings or perceptions resulting in inadvertently appearing rude or inconsiderate
- Literal interpretation of communication from others
- Avoidant of social contact or events, and may experience heightened anxiety in social situations
- Language is learned and used in "chunks" (e.g., phrases, dialogue from TV shows, etc.)
- Communication is used for delivering information or requesting, not as a way of interacting socially

Behavioural Traits

- May respond poorly to changes, sensory stimuli, transitions, lack of structure, and restrictions
- Repetitive movements (e.g., jumping, rocking, pacing) and speech (i.e., talking about favourite topics, interest)
- Rigid, inflexible and rule-bound behaviour
- Inappropriate behaviour given the social situation (e.g., speaking too loud in place of worship)
- Exaggerated emotional response to situations (e.g., tantrums when asked to do something that they don't want to do)
- Superior ability to focus on favourite activity or area of interest (e.g., spends hours mastering video game to the exclusion of other pastimes)

Cognitive Traits

- Average to superior intelligence
- Detail oriented approach to tasks which may result in missing the "bigger picture"
- May have associated learning disabilities (e.g., non-verbal learning disability)
- Often have high verbal scores in a cognitive assessment, and low performance scores
- Difficulty seeing "parts-to-whole" and "whole-to-parts" relationships
- Prefer technical/factual information over abstract

Associated Challenges

- Anxiety and depression
- Attention difficulties (e.g., shifting attention; attending to unimportant stimuli)
- Tics or Tourette Syndrome
- Gross and fine motor deficits
- Poor organizational skills (e.g., time management and planning tasks)