

# Autism Spectrum Disorder Across the Lifespan — Children, Adolescents, Adults (2025)

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Compiled October 02, 2025

## Overview & Definitions

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, plus restricted/repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities.
- DSM-5: symptoms present in early development, cause impairment, not better explained by intellectual disability alone.
- Spectrum: includes wide range of severity, abilities, adaptive functioning. Symptoms evolve across lifespan.

## Epidemiology & Course

- Prevalence: ~1 in 36 children (CDC, 2023); global ~1–2%.
- Males more often diagnosed, but females often underrecognized due to masking/subtler presentation.
- Core symptoms persist; expression changes with age. Comorbidities common (ADHD, anxiety, depression, epilepsy).
- Outcomes vary: some achieve independence, others require lifelong support.

## Etiology & Risk Factors

- Strong genetic contribution (heritability ~70–80%); many genes implicated.
- Environmental influences: advanced parental age, prenatal complications, perinatal hypoxia, toxins (small effects).
- Neurobiology: atypical connectivity, early brain overgrowth, E/I imbalance.
- Vaccines NOT associated with autism (debunked).

## Clinical Features

Children: delayed language, limited eye contact, repetitive behaviors, sensory sensitivities.

Adolescents: social difficulties, restricted interests, anxiety/depression risk, masking/camouflaging.

Adults: difficulties with relationships, work, independence; comorbid mood/anxiety disorders common.

## Assessment & Diagnosis

- • Developmental history, observation, collateral reports.
- • Tools: ADOS-2, ADI-R, CARS-2, SCQ, SRS; M-CHAT-R/F at 18 & 24 months.
- • Adolescents/adults: may mask symptoms; consider comorbidity.
- • Differential: social anxiety, ADHD, intellectual disability, selective mutism.

## Interventions — Core

- • Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI)/ABA.
- • Naturalistic Developmental Behavioral Interventions (PRT, ESDM).
- • Speech/language therapy; AAC if needed.
- • Occupational therapy; sensory integration, ADLs.
- • Social skills training; CBT adaptations for ASD.

## Supports & Accommodations

- • School: IEP/504, structured teaching, visual supports, sensory adjustments.
- • Parent training, psychoeducation.
- • Transition planning: vocational training, independence.
- • Adults: workplace accommodations, job coaching.

## Pharmacologic Management

- • No meds for core ASD; treat comorbidities.
- • Irritability/aggression: risperidone, aripiprazole (FDA approved for youth).
- • ADHD: stimulants, atomoxetine (variable response).
- • Anxiety/depression: SSRIs (mixed evidence).
- • Sleep: melatonin commonly used.

## Special Considerations

- • Females: subtler symptoms, masking, internalizing problems.
- • Intellectual disability in ~30–40%.
- • Disparities in minority/low-SES groups.
- • Aging adults: limited research, high health disparities.
- • Neurodiversity perspective: focus on strengths, acceptance, adaptation.

## Prognosis

- • Variable outcomes: influenced by IQ, language, early intervention, supports.
- • Early intervention improves adaptive functioning.
- • Some achieve independence; others need lifelong supports.

## Clinical Snapshots

Pediatric: deficits in social communication + restricted/repetitive behaviors; screen M-CHAT; refer for ADOS-2; start early intervention.

Adolescent/Adult: assess masking, comorbid anxiety/depression; support transitions; vocational/social skills programs; accommodations for independence.

## References (2019–2025)

- • APA DSM-5-TR (2022): Autism criteria.
- • CDC (2023). ASD prevalence in U.S.
- • Lord et al. (2020). Autism spectrum disorder. *Lancet*, 395, 908–922.
- • Lai & Szatmari (2020–2024). Sex/gender differences & camouflaging.
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1. American Psychiatric Association. (2022). DSM-5-TR: Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5th ed., text revision).
2. CDC. (2023). Prevalence of Autism Spectrum Disorder among children in the U.S.
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