

Psychiatry



Information about **ASPERGER'S SYNDROME**
in children and adolescents

WHAT IS ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

in children and adolescents?

Asperger's syndrome (often abbreviated to AS) is a developmental disorder within the autism spectrum. In other words, it is a milder form of autism. Asperger's syndrome manifests itself by the child or adolescent, to a lesser or greater extent, having a reduced understanding of social interaction between people. Children and adolescents with Asperger's syndrome can also have other characteristic traits, such as motor problems, very limited interests and difficulties communicating and giving expression to their thoughts, feelings and needs.

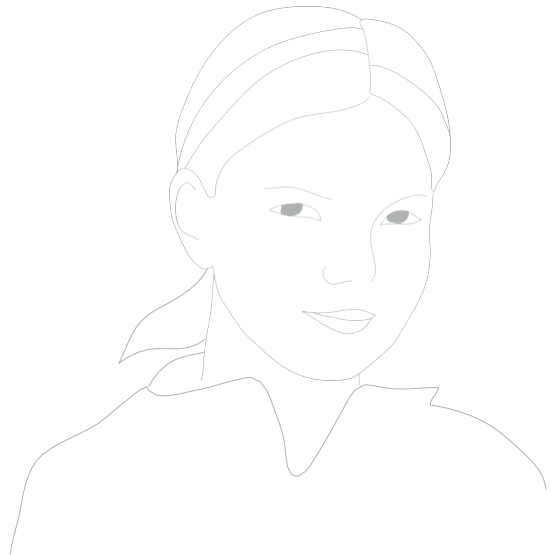
Asperger's syndrome is generally detected between the ages of five and ten. The parents have often been aware of symptoms in the first years of life, but they only become really clear when the child experiences difficulties in a social setting, for example at preschool or school.

Asperger's syndrome is a hereditary developmental disorder that affects the child throughout his or her life. It is therefore not possible to cure Asperger's syndrome. However, the illness can be treated so that it affects the child's or adolescent's everyday life as little as possible.

The earlier Asperger's syndrome is detected, the easier it is to begin the correct treatment and help the child or adolescent.

HOW MANY PEOPLE HAVE ASPERGER'S SYNDROME?

- **Around 10 children in every 10,000 are born with Asperger's syndrome.**
 - **Five times as many boys as girls have Asperger's syndrome.**
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SYMPTOMS OF ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

There can be considerable differences in how Asperger's syndrome is expressed, as the various symptoms can manifest themselves to a greater or lesser extent.

Children and adolescents with Asperger's syndrome usually have normal levels of intelligence. The disorder is characterised by: difficulties in connection with social interaction and unusual behaviour.

Some of the most common symptoms are:

SOCIAL INTERACTION.

The child is different from other children when it comes to:

- **Eye contact, facial expression, posture and body movements:** The child does not look other people in the eyes, looks down at the floor and has a posture that differs from that of other children.
 - **Development of common interests, activities and emotional relations with children of the same age.**
 - **Emotional reactions, tact or understanding the interaction between what people say, do and feel.** For example, the child rarely seeks comfort or draws attention to the fact that he or she needs care.
 - **Lack of tact.**
 - **Methods of speaking and communicating.**
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UNUSUAL BEHAVIOUR

Children and adolescents with Asperger's syndrome behave differently from other children when they are preoccupied with their interests or leisure activities. This means that they:

- **Are heavily preoccupied with one or more narrowly defined interests.** For example, this might be knowing all the flight departures from the airport, knowing all the names of football players in a football tournament or recognising all the world's flags.
 - **Force themselves to keep to specific, pointless routines or rituals.** This might be putting numbers into a system, without the system having any purpose in itself. There can also be stereotyped, repeated habits or systems in day-to-day life.
 - **Repeat the same movement.** For example, they might twist or flap their hands.
 - **Are very preoccupied with parts or details that do not have any actual significance in the bigger context.** For example, this might be the smell or consistency of a toy, or the feeling when they touch it.
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HOW CAN A PERSON GET HELP?

In the vast majority of cases, the suspicion of Asperger's syndrome first arises with the parents, at the child's preschool or school.

If Asperger's syndrome is suspected, parents can themselves contact the child's GP. The doctor can determine whether there are grounds for this suspicion and refer the matter on for further investigation and treatment, if necessary.

The first step is often an initial discussion and examination with a psychologist or representative of PPR (a Danish educational psychological counselling service) who is linked to the preschool or school. After this, a decision is made as to whether the child can be helped at this level, or whether it is necessary to refer the child for further examination and treatment, for example at a Mental Health Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.



TREATMENT OF ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

The overall aim of the treatment of Asperger's syndrome is to equip the child to cope with a life with this developmental disorder. If Asperger's syndrome is suspected, the child or adolescent will be examined, either by his or her own doctor, by a specialist in child and adolescent psychiatry, or at the Mental Health Centre for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

Within Mental Health Services – Capital Region of Denmark, the examination where Asperger's syndrome is suspected begins with a basic discussion aimed at determining whether Asperger's syndrome is present and which treatment is required. At this point there is a discussion about what symptoms are present and how much effect they have on everyday life.

If Asperger's syndrome is suspected in children below the age of 15, the parents are always involved in the course of treatment. The same applies to the investigation and treatment of adolescents over the age of 15, unless otherwise agreed.

If Asperger's syndrome is present, an assessment is carried out regarding what changes are necessary in the child's or adolescent's day-to-day life in order to create the best possible existence for them. In the vast majority of cases, the treatment consists of social or educational support from the preschool, school or municipality. In other cases, this treatment is supplemented with medicinal treatment of any complications such as anxiety or depression in the child or adolescent.

If the medicinal aspect of the treatment takes place within Mental Health Services – Capital Region of Denmark, the doctor will draw up a plan of treatment together with the child or adolescent, the parents and other staff to ensure there is agreement as to what will happen.

EDUCATION ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS (PSYCHOEDUCATION)

A good understanding of symptoms, illness and treatment helps to make it easier to live with Asperger's syndrome for both the child/adolescent and the parents. For this reason, education about Asperger's syndrome is an important part of the treatment.

Education about mental illness is also called psychoeducation, and it forms part of the vast majority of courses of treatment under Mental Health Services – Capital Region of Denmark. The family and other close relatives can also benefit greatly from taking part in the education.

A good knowledge of the symptoms and the reactions to them can help to resolve the problems associated with having a child or adolescent with Asperger's syndrome. When you are very familiar with the symptoms and reactions, it is easier to help the child or adolescent by handling the reactions in a positive manner and support and train the child or adolescent in social and practical skills.

You can ask the staff at the centre about the possibilities to participate in psychoeducation.

MEDICINAL TREATMENT

It is not possible to treat Asperger's syndrome with medication, although it is possible to treat some of the complications that often arise in connection with Asperger's syndrome. These complications include anxiety or depression. By treating these with medication, the child or adolescent can have more energy to work with his or her own resources and on the difficulties that are associated with Asperger's syndrome.

During puberty in particular, the adolescent may temporarily experience severe symptoms of anxiety which can be helped with medication. There can also be periods during puberty when the adolescent's repeated actions take on the character of compulsive actions or when the adolescent self-harms. During such periods, treatment with medication can be helpful.

Some individuals experience side-effects in connection with medicinal treatment. The extent of these side-effects varies from person to person. If the child or adolescent experiences side-effects, it may be necessary to speak to the doctor about changing to a different type of medication.

If medicinal treatment is stopped, this must be done gradually and by agreement with the doctor. The body needs time to adjust.

WHAT CAN RELATIVES DO TO HELP?

The most important task for relatives is to ensure that the child or adolescent receives professional help. It can be difficult to tell whether your child just acts a little differently, or whether we are actually dealing with Asperger's syndrome. It is up to the doctor to decide.

The relative of a child or adolescent undergoing treatment is best able to provide support by listening, being there for them, and making everyday life easier for the child or adolescent. For example, you can pay particular attention to supporting the child in conjunction with leisure activities, help to arrange visits with friends or help with homework. You can also help find activities that are specifically arranged for children and adolescents with Asperger's syndrome.

Education about mental illness can help make parents more aware of their child's condition, the symptoms and the pattern of the illness. Knowledge about Asperger's syndrome and guidance on how to recognise the symptoms help parents support and train the child or adolescent in social and practical skills.

There are associations for people who have or are relatives of people with Asperger's syndrome. Information about these associations can be found at www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/patientinfo.

Mental Health Services – Capital Region of Denmark has published a leaflet containing information about the role of relatives, the involvement of relatives in the treatment and the potential for help and support for relatives. Please feel free to contact the staff at the Mental Health Department for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry or find the leaflet at www.psykiatri-regionh.dk/patientinfo.

GOOD TIPS FOR RELATIVES

- **Take the illness seriously**
 - **Find out what Asperger's syndrome is**
 - **Help and support the child or adolescent in getting professional help**
 - **Plan activities that take the disorder and symptoms into consideration**
 - **Be there for the child or adolescent – including when he or she is frustrated, angry or tired of it**
 - **Avoid reproaches – it is not possible for children or young people with Asperger's syndrome to control their way of being and thinking**
 - **Don't start off long discussions about why the child or adolescent has Asperger's syndrome**
 - **Seek help for yourself if you have questions, lack support or need assistance in your everyday life**
 - **Remember that Asperger's syndrome is not anyone's fault**
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FURTHER INFORMATION

www.psykiatri-regionh.dk

You also have the opportunity to consult with PsykInfo for further information, advice and guidance on mental illness. PsykInfo is a mental health information centre in central Copenhagen aimed at all citizens that need to know about mental illness.

See <http://www.psykinfo-regionh.dk>.



This booklet is for you who are a patient of Mental Health Services (Capital Region of Denmark) and your relatives. With this booklet, we want to help you and your relatives to experience a good and comprehensive treatment – and good co-operation with the Mental Health Services (Capital Region of Denmark) staff.

It is you and those closest to you who live with the illness and best know how you feel and how your illness affects your life.

We place great emphasis on keeping you well informed about the treatment throughout the process and you are always welcome to ask questions.

THE PATIENT AT THE CENTRE

The treatment at the Mental Health Services (Capital Region of Denmark) often consists of a combination of therapies and is always based on the patient's individual and most acute needs. Therefore, no courses of treatment are the same.

The mental health staff has professional insight into how mental illnesses can develop and how they can be treated. We want to hear how you experience your illness and what your treatment goal is. We consider both when collaborating to plan the treatment.

The goal is for the treatment to heal you or make you significantly better. It varies when and to what extent people with mental illness recover. However, with the right treatment everyone can develop and create or re-create a daily routine.

REGION HOVEDSTADENS PSYKIATRI (MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES – CAPITAL REGION OF DENMARK)

Many come into contact with a mental illness during their lifetime. At the Mental Health Services (Capital Region of Denmark), we treat approximately 41,000 children and adults for various illnesses every year. The treatment is provided both on an outpatient basis, by visiting teams and, where necessary, by inpatient admission.

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