

A GP's guide to adults with Asperger syndrome

Do you have patients who do not have serious mental health difficulties¹, yet find it hard to fit in socially? They may have an unusual social style, have few or no friends, experience anxiety or stress, and be unable to complete a college course or find stable employment. **If so, they may have Asperger syndrome.**

Not everyone with Asperger syndrome will have a diagnosis; in fact it's quite common for people with the condition to be diagnosed later in life. Many people will be unaware that they have a form of autism.

However, a diagnosis can be important because it helps people to make sense of the difficulties they may have experienced, understand themselves better, and access appropriate services and support.

In this guide, we have listed some questions you can ask a patient if they believe they have Asperger syndrome and wish to be assessed.

What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is a lifelong, developmental disability. It is a form of autism and part of the 'autism spectrum'. Autism is often described as a hidden disability because you cannot tell that someone has the condition just by looking at them.

¹ Adults with serious mental health difficulties should already have been referred for diagnosis or other help.

Autism spectrum disorders are described in both ICD-10 and DSM-IV international classification systems.²

If your patient list is 5,000, expect there to be between 18 and 24 people on it who have Asperger syndrome.³

People with Asperger syndrome experience difficulty in communicating effectively with others. They often have problems making 'appropriate' conversation, and sometimes seem pedantic. They may have a poor understanding of non-verbal communication such as tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions. Some may find it difficult to make or maintain eye contact.

Many people with Asperger syndrome desire social contact but struggle to understand the reciprocal nature of 'typical' social interaction, and other people's language and humour. As a consequence, their attempts at interaction can sometimes seem rather awkward. It can make the person prone to teasing and isolation. Furthermore, their inability to read people's intentions can make them vulnerable and may mean they are taken advantage of.

People with Asperger syndrome often have a need for routines. Some may have intense, almost

² World Health Organisation (1992). *International classification of diseases*. 10th edition. Geneva: World Health Organisation; American Psychiatric Association (2000). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders: DSM-IV*. Washington DC: American Psychiatric Association. DSM-V is due to be published in 2013.

³ Laith, A. H. W. and Williams, W. R. (2007). Diagnostic trends in autistic spectrum disorders in the South Wales valleys. *Autism*, **11**(6), pp497-487; Kadesjö, B., Gillberg, C., and Hagberg, B. (1999). Brief report: autism and Asperger syndrome in seven-year-old children: a total population study. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, **29**(4), pp327-331; Ehlers, S. and Gillberg, C. (1993). The epidemiology of Asperger syndrome. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, **34**(8), pp1327-1350.

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obsessive, interests. They may also rely heavily on other people in their day-to-day life in a way that you might not expect, given their apparent intelligence or independence.

Some people with Asperger syndrome can experience over- and under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, lights or colours.

Be aware that adults with Asperger syndrome may have learned to cover up their problems, so signs of the condition will often be quite subtle. This is why people can experience difficulty in getting support.

As a result of difficulties with social interaction and communication, and a lack of support, many adults with Asperger syndrome are socially isolated and can consequently develop mental health problems.

Questions to consider when talking to adult patients who may have Asperger syndrome

Does he or she:

- › find many social situations, especially in groups, confusing (even though they may seem OK talking one-to-one with you)?
- › often find it hard to guess what other people are thinking and feeling, or why they are laughing at a joke?
- › find it difficult to make and maintain close friendships?
- › have a history of problems at school or college, such as difficulties getting on with tutors or other students? Were they teased or bullied?
- › find it difficult to secure satisfactory employment or stay in work?
- › have any hobbies or interests which take up a lot of their time (or had these when they were younger)?
- › get worried or annoyed about change, especially unexpected change?

- › display difficulties with communication and appear to lack social intuition?

If the answer to most of these questions is yes, and your patient wishes to be assessed, it may be worthwhile discussing their case with the service that has responsibility for diagnosis. This is usually your local mental health or learning disability team.

Five reasons why diagnosis is important

- › Autism, including Asperger syndrome, is a recognised disability. If someone meets the criteria set out in ICD-10 or DSM-IV⁴, they should have the opportunity to be diagnosed.
- › Diagnosis can help a person to make sense of their history, which is often marked by difficult experiences and misunderstanding from others.
- › Diagnosis can help a person to understand themselves better and make necessary adjustments for the future.
- › Diagnosis can help families, friends, partners and carers to better understand and cope with a person's needs and behaviour.
- › Diagnosis can help a person to access appropriate services. They may also be able to get support from their employer, college or university, social and housing services, benefits agencies and other organisations.

⁴ Refer to footnote 2.

www.autism.org.uk

Autism Helpline: 0808 800 4104,
open 10am-4pm, Monday-Friday

The Autism Helpline is a service for people with autism and Asperger syndrome, their families and carers, and professionals. Calls are free from landlines and most mobiles.