

What are the differences between FASD and autism?

Fetal alcohol spectrum disorders (FASD) and autism spectrum disorders (ASD) have a number of similarities. They are both disabilities that can affect brain function, development, behavior, and social skills.^{1,2} People with FASD often have a number of autistic-like traits. Sometimes people with FASD are also on the autism spectrum; one study found that as many as 72% of children with fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS) have autism.³ However, there are a number of differences between the two disorders. Below we have listed some of the common “symptoms” of both FASD and ASD. Things that are in bold are effects that are seen in both disorders. Please note that both FASD and ASD are spectrum disorders; each case is unique and people on either spectrum may display some, all, or none of these characteristics.

FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (FASD)

- Affects about 1 in 20 children⁴
- One known cause: prenatal alcohol exposure⁵
- **Effects are lifelong**⁶
- **Early intervention can help**⁷
- **Sensitive to light, touch, taste, smells, or sound**⁸
- Linked with microcephaly (the head and brain are much smaller than expected)⁹
- Often comfortable starting conversations and joining social activities¹⁰
- **Difficulty with change in routines or transitioning from one task to another**¹¹
- **Issues with speech and language**¹²
- **Hyperactive behavior**¹³
- **Impulsive behavior**¹⁴

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

- Affects about 1 in 59 children¹⁹
- Has no single known cause²⁰
- **Effects are lifelong**²¹
- **Early intervention can help**²²
- **Sensitive to light, touch, taste, smells, or sound**²³
- Linked with macrocephaly (the head is much larger than expected)²⁴
- Often avoid social situations²⁵
- Difficulty with change in routines or transitioning from one task to another²⁶
- Increased risk of epilepsy and seizures²⁷
- **Issues with speech and language skills**²⁸
- Repeat words or phrases over and over (known as echolalia)²⁹

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FETAL ALCOHOL SPECTRUM DISORDER (FASD)

- **Short attention span**¹⁵
- **May have difficulty in school**¹⁶
- **Listed as a medical condition in the ICD-10 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems)**¹⁷
- **Included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5); however, it is not listed as FASD but as neurobehavioral disorder associated with prenatal alcohol exposure (ND-PAE)**¹⁸

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)

- **Uses repetitive motions (such as flapping hands, rocking body, or spinning in circles)**³⁰
- **Hyperactive behavior**³¹
- **Impulsive behavior**³²
- **Short attention span**³³
- **May have difficulty in school**³⁴
- **Listed as a medical condition in the ICD-10 (International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems)**³⁵
- **Included in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)**³⁶

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