What is Asperger syndrome?

Asperger syndrome is a lifelong neurodevelopmental condition which is part of the ‘Autism Spectrum’ (also sometimes called Autism Spectrum Disorder or Conditions). Individuals with Asperger syndrome do not have an intellectual impairment. Like other adults on the autism spectrum, adults with Asperger syndrome have core difficulties or differences in the following areas:

**Social Communication and Social Interaction** – lack interest in or have difficulty forming relationships; interpreting communication literally, such as jokes and sarcasm; difficulty making conversation (‘small talk’); difficulty using and understanding social cues (such as eye contact, gesture and turn taking, vocal intonation, personal space) and difficulty with understanding another person’s perspective or appearing to lack empathy (understanding and responding to other people’s thoughts and feelings).

**Restricted, Repetitive Patterns of Behaviour, Interests or Activities** – restricted, repetitive patterns of thinking that can impact on situations such as coping with change or coping with new situations; difficulty responding to changes in a conversation, preferring routines, difficulty in planning ahead or predicting what might happen next, engaging in repetitive behaviours, having very strong interests.
How many people have Asperger syndrome?
Research (Brugha et al., 2012) has found that around 1.1% of the general population has an autism spectrum condition, including Asperger syndrome (that’s around 1 in every 100 people). More men than women are diagnosed with an autism spectrum condition. It can be difficult to recognise and diagnose women with Asperger syndrome because the characteristics can be more subtle or masked. Because it is a neurodevelopmental condition, characteristics of Asperger syndrome can change over time, but the person will always have the condition.

What causes Asperger syndrome?
The exact cause of Asperger syndrome remains unclear. There are likely to be a combination of factors, both genetic and environmental, which contribute to the development of an autism spectrum condition. We know there are strong genetic links as there is often more than one person on the autism spectrum within families. Asperger syndrome is not caused by a person’s life experiences or upbringing. Even if the individual is not diagnosed with Asperger syndrome until adulthood, they will have developed the condition from an early age.
Why is diagnosis useful?
Many people will learn about Asperger syndrome through media such as television, books or online, and will identify with the condition. For many people, this is enough. However, for others, it is important to gain formal recognition that they have the condition, and be able to access specialist support.

Getting a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome is often useful to help the person make sense of their life, particularly if they have always felt different, or noticed their difficulties communicating and interacting with people. Some people have been given diagnoses of other conditions (related to their mental health or personality development), but Asperger syndrome seems to make more sense to them.

Who can diagnose Asperger syndrome?
- Children can be diagnosed with Asperger syndrome by a paediatrician, clinical psychologist, or child psychiatrist who is trained in autism spectrum conditions (ASC)
- For adults who have not been diagnosed in childhood, a specialist diagnostic assessment with a health professional (such as a psychiatrist, clinical psychologist, nurse specialist or speech and language therapist) who is trained in assessing ASCs in adults will be needed
- GPs do not usually diagnose Asperger syndrome, but they can request a specialist assessment
How can adults with Asperger syndrome be supported?
Adults with Asperger syndrome can be supported to understand their condition and improve their daily lives.

Recommendations from the National Institute of Clinical Excellence (NICE; CG142, 2012) include:

- Support to understand the condition, access to information resources, and support groups
- Support to families, partners and carers
- Social skills training to improve social and communication skills
- Support to access social and leisure activities (and reduce social isolation)
- Support to access and maintain employment (or further education)
- Psychological treatments for additional conditions such as anxiety or depression
- Medication treatment for additional conditions such as anxiety or depression
- Support to manage the physical environment (particularly sensory issues) and advice in relation to accommodation

Other conditions frequently occur along with Asperger syndrome such as mental health issues (e.g. anxiety, depression) and other neurodevelopmental conditions (e.g. Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Tourette syndrome). It is important that these are also appropriately assessed and treated.

Adults with Asperger syndrome can also be very sensitive to sensory stimulation (touch, light, sound, smell, taste), and have difficulties with their executive functioning (ability to plan and organise, manage time, getting started on tasks, doing more than one task at once).

Not all adults with Asperger syndrome consider these issues to be a disability, but prefer to see them as a difference from other people. Often adults with Asperger syndrome have unique strengths such as detailed knowledge of subjects, a good ability to remember details, and the ability to think logically.
Reference

Resources
National Autistic Society - national information and support service
www.autism.org.uk


Recommended Reading

Local Support Group
Autistic Nottingham (formerly Nottingham Aspies)
http://groupspaces.com/AutisticNottingham/join/

Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust,
Specialist Services Directorate,
Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities Service

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