

Autism

Autism is a complex disorder which affects a person's ability to interact with the world around them. Commonly referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), autism has wide ranging levels of severity.

Signs of autism include poor language development, unusual or repetitive behaviours and a diminished interest in other people. Typically, there are significant concerns about the person's social interaction, communication or behaviour before a diagnosis of autism is made.

It is often difficult to understand the behaviour of people with autism, and the world can be a confusing place for the person involved. Autism affects approximately one in 160 individuals, with males being more likely to be diagnosed than females.

Autism is a developmental disability thought to have neurological or genetic causes (or both). However, the cause of autism is not yet fully understood and there is no known cure. A person with autism has difficulties in some areas of their development, but other skills may develop typically.

The areas most likely to be affected include communication, social interaction and difficulty with flexibility of thought and play. People with autism often have a restricted range of interests, and repetitive or stereotyped behaviours.

Communication

People with autism often have difficulty with language. They are likely to have difficulty expressing their needs, wants, ideas, experiences and opinions. There can be difficulties using appropriate grammar and vocabulary, and in constructing meaningful sentences.

As well, not understanding the meaning and purpose of body language and the spoken and written word are also likely to be evident. Individuals with autism may misunderstand words, interpret them literally or not understand them at all. Other people's feelings and emotions can also be difficult to understand.

Social interaction

Social interaction is an essential part of life for most people. However, one of the most significant problems for people with autism is difficulty with social skills – also called 'social communication' or 'pragmatics'.

This may mean that they appear disinterested in others, 'aloof' or unable to engage in social interactions. They may have difficulty using or interpreting non-verbal communication (such as eye contact, gestures, and facial expressions), have difficulty establishing and maintaining friendships, or appear disinterested in the experiences and emotions of others.

Some people with autism appear to be withdrawn and can become isolated – others try very hard to be sociable, but may not seem to get it right.

Behaviour

There is a range of behaviours commonly linked with autism. These may include:

- **Language** – absent, delayed or abnormal patterns
- **Play** – isolated, repetitive, a preference for predictable play, difficulty with flexible thinking, such as pretending that a box is a boat or a stick is a horse

- **Body movements** – stereotypical behaviour, such as flapping and toe walking, and other behaviours that may cause self-injury, such as hand biting
- **Restricted or obsessive behaviour** – with favourite topics, objects, places, people or activities
- **Rituals and routines** – bring some order to chaos and confusion. A change to routine can result in the individual displaying high levels of stress, anxiety or acting out
- **Tantrums** – can be a way to express extreme confusion, stress, anxiety, anger and frustration when unable to express their emotions in another way
- **Sensory sensitivities** – to certain sounds, colours, tastes, smells and textures.

Type of help available

There is a range of help available, including assessment, education programs and family support.

Assessment

A detailed assessment is crucial to ensuring an accurate diagnosis. It will be carried out by a multidisciplinary team of a paediatrician (where appropriate), psychologist or psychiatrist, and speech pathologist.

Some children will demonstrate signs of autism by the age of two, but a firm diagnosis may not be possible until three or older. However, if there are any concerns regarding a person's development, it is crucial that an assessment is conducted immediately by the appropriate professionals.

There is a significant amount of research indicating that early intervention maximises outcomes and gives people with autism the best possible chance of developing appropriate skills.

Education programs

The educational needs of individual students vary greatly. Intensive, specialised programs may be desirable for some students with autism, while other students may be suited to mainstream programs and services. It will depend on the student's level of functioning and need.

Students can benefit greatly from being exposed to the modelling provided by their peers and parents will need to consider this when choosing between mainstream or specialist schools.

Family support

The family (parents and siblings) are also likely to need some support. Having a child with autism can have a significant effect on parents, who may react to the diagnosis in a variety of ways including relief, shock, grief, anger and guilt. Feelings of stress, confusion and anxiety are also common in parents who are caring for a child with autism.

Parents may need specialised services, such as respite and residential care (child care help), social skills training and living skills training. It can also be valuable for parents to consider joining a support group or participate in counselling.

Research has shown that while having a brother or sister with autism can be stressful, difficult and sometimes embarrassing, it can also be rewarding, positive and enriching. Offering siblings support and information can help them adjust to having a brother or sister with autism. There are a number of groups and organisations who provide support to both child and adult siblings.

Autism and immunisation

During the 1990s, there was concern in the community about a possible link between the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism. This is due to the findings of research (known as the Wakefield study) that was conducted in London in 1998. The Wakefield study, has since been discredited and withdrawn by the journal that originally published it. Dr Wakefield's registration as a doctor in the United Kingdom has also been cancelled.

Concerns have also been raised about thiomersal (also known as thimerosal), a mercury-based preservative used in some vaccines. Concern about child safety prompted researchers around the world to investigate any possible link between the MMR, other vaccines and autism, but extensive research conducted globally for a decade did not establish any link between vaccines and autism. Although there is no evidence that thiomersal causes autism, or any other developmental problems, as a precaution it has been withdrawn from the standard childhood vaccines in Australia and many other countries.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Autism Victoria trading as amaze Tel. (03) 9657 1600 or 1300 308 699
- Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) Tel. 1300 653 227
- Siblings Australia
- Association for Children with a Disability Tel. (03) 9818 2000, rural callers free call on 1800 654 013
- Centre for Developmental Disability Health Victoria (CDDHV)
- Alpha Autism Employment Program Tel. (03) 9885 2777

Things to remember

- People with autism find communication and socialising difficult.
- A firm diagnosis may not be possible under three years of age.
- Parents and siblings of individuals with autism may need support and regular breaks.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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