Autism spectrum disorder (autism)

Summary

- Autism spectrum disorder includes autistic disorder, Asperger’s syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).
- Autistic people find communication and socialising difficult.
- Autistic people like routine and predictability.
- All autistic people are unique.
- Vaccinations do not cause autism.

Autism spectrum disorder (autism) is a condition that affects a person’s ability to interact with the world around them. Autism has wide-ranging levels of severity and varying characteristics. No two autistic people are alike.

The term autism spectrum disorder includes autism, Asperger’s syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

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

Autism affects around 1 in 100 to 1 in 110 people of school age, with males being around three times more likely to be affected than females.

Autistic people have difficulties in the two main areas of:

- social communication and interaction
- restricted or repetitive behaviours, interests and activities (including sensory processing difficulties).

Communication and social interaction for autistic people

Autistic people often have difficulty with communication. They may have difficulty expressing their needs. Some autistic people never develop language, while others might have good verbal language skills.

For those who do develop language, they may have difficulties using appropriate grammar and vocabulary, and constructing meaningful sentences. They may misunderstand words, interpret them literally or not understand them at all. Other people’s feelings and emotions can be difficult to understand.

Autistic people can find social skills and social communication very difficult.

This may mean that they appear disinterested in others, ‘aloof’ or unsure of how to engage in social interactions. They may have difficulty using or interpreting non-verbal communication such as eye contact, gestures and facial expressions, or appear disinterested in the experiences and emotions of others. Establishing and maintaining friendships can be challenging for some autistic people.

Some autistic people appear to be withdrawn and can become isolated – others try very hard to be sociable, but may not seem to get it right. There is a range of help available, including assessment, education programs and family support.

Characteristics of autism

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

- challenges with communicating and interacting with others
• repetitive and different behaviours, moving their bodies in different ways
• strong interest in one topic or subject
• unusual reactions to what they see, hear, smell, touch or taste
• preferences for routines and disliking change.

Assessment for autism

There is no medical test for diagnosing autism. Autism is diagnosed through observation by a multidisciplinary team of health professionals.

Diagnosis of autism in children

Autism in children is diagnosed through observation by a multidisciplinary team of the following health professionals:

• paediatrician
• psychologist or psychiatrist
• speech pathologist.

Some children will show signs of autism by the age of two and will be diagnosed then. Other may be diagnosed when they are older. The earlier autism can be diagnosed the sooner therapy can begin. Early intervention has been shown to improve outcomes for autistic children.

Diagnosis of autism in adults

It is not unusual for autistic people to have reached adulthood without a diagnosis.

Sometimes people will discover some information about autism that makes them think ‘That sounds like me.’ They may then choose to talk to a health professional for a diagnosis, or they may not.

You may choose to seek a diagnosis for suspected autism if:

• you have been diagnosed with a mental health condition and/or intellectual disability during childhood or adolescence, but think that you may have autism
• you have struggled with feeling socially isolated and different
• your child or another family member has been diagnosed with autism and some of the characteristics of autism sound familiar to you.

If you wish to seek an assessment for autism, you can:

• talk to your GP – who may refer you to a psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism
• talk to a psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism (you do not need a referral from your GP to see a psychologist).

A psychologist or psychiatrist with experience in the assessment and diagnosis of autism will ask you about your childhood, and experiences at school and as an adult. They may also do some psychological or psychiatric testing. A speech therapist may also be consulted to assess your social communication skills. All of this information will be used to help make a diagnosis.

If you are diagnosed with autism, you may feel relieved to know why you feel or behave the way you do. A diagnosis may also help you and your family to understand and cope with the challenges you face.

Education for autistic children and young people

The educational needs of autistic students vary greatly. Intensive, specialised programs may be desirable for some students, while other students may be suited to mainstream programs. It will depend on the student’s learning needs.

Information about primary and secondary schooling for autistic can be found on the Amaze website.

Family support for autistic people
The family members (parents and siblings) of autistic individuals are also likely to need some support. Having an autistic child 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 an autistic child. It can be valuable for parents to consider joining a support group or participating in counselling.

For more information visit the Better Health Channel page Autism spectrum disorder – tips for parents.

No link between autism and immunisation

Any link between immunisation and autism has been completely discredited.

During the 1990s, concern in the community about a possible link between the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) vaccine and autism was generated by the findings of research (known as the Wakefield study) 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.

Extensive research conducted globally for a decade did not establish any link between vaccines and autism.

Where to get help

- Your GP (doctor)
- Your child’s paediatrician
- Amaze Autism Advisor service for autistic people, families and professionals – Tel. 1300 308 699, 8 am to 7 pm, Monday to Friday
- Association for Children with a Disability Tel. (03) 9880 7000, rural callers free call on Tel. 1800 654 013
- Asperger’s Victoria
- Carers Australia (Vic) Tel. 1800 514 845

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