

What is Autism

Autism is the most common condition in a group of developmental disorders known as the autism spectrum disorders (ASDs). It is characterized by impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors or narrow, obsessive interests. These behaviors can range in impact from mild to disabling. Autism varies widely in its severity and symptoms and may go unrecognized, especially in mildly affected children or when more debilitating handicaps mask it. Experts estimate that three to six children out of every 1,000 will have autism. Males are four times more likely to have autism than females.

Causes:

Scientists aren't certain what causes autism, but it's likely that both genetics and environment play a role.

1. Researchers have identified a number of genes associated with the disorder. In families with one autistic child, the risk of having a second child with the disorder is approximately 5 percent, or one in 20. In some cases, parents and other relatives of an autistic child show mild impairments in social and communicative skills or engage in repetitive behaviors. Evidence also suggests that some emotional disorders, such as manic depression, occur more frequently than average in the families of people with autism.
2. Studies have found irregularities in several regions of the brain.
3. Other studies suggest that people with autism have abnormal levels of serotonin or other neurotransmitters in the brain could result from the disruption of normal brain development early in fetal development caused by defects in genes that control brain growth and that regulate how neurons communicate with each other.

The theory that parental practices are responsible for autism has now been disproved

How is autism diagnosed?

Doctors rely on a core group of behaviors to alert them to the possibility of a diagnosis of autism.

These behaviors are:

- impaired ability to make friends with peers
- impaired ability to initiate or sustain a conversation with others
- absence or impairment of imaginative and social play
- stereotyped, repetitive, or unusual use of language
- restricted patterns of interest that are abnormal in intensity or focus
- preoccupation with certain objects or subjects
- inflexible adherence to specific routines or rituals

Is there any treatment?

There is no cure for autism. The ideal treatment plan coordinates therapies and interventions that target the core symptoms of autism: impaired social interaction, problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, and obsessive or repetitive routines and interests. Most professionals agree that the earlier the intervention, the better.

- **Educational/behavioral interventions:** Therapists use highly structured and intensive skill-oriented training sessions to help children develop social and language skills. Family counseling for the parents and siblings of children with autism often helps families cope with the particular challenges of living with an autistic child.
- **Medications:** antidepressant medication to handle symptoms of anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder. Anti-psychotic medications are used to treat severe behavioral problems. Seizures can be treated with one or more of the anticonvulsant drugs. Stimulant drugs, such as those used for children with attention deficit disorder (ADD), are sometimes used effectively to help decrease impulsivity and hyperactivity.
- **Other therapies:** There are a number of controversial therapies or interventions available for autistic children, but few, if any, are supported by scientific studies. Parents should use caution before adopting any of these treatments.

Reference: National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/detail_autism.htm