

Autism is a developmental disability that is one disorder in a group of developmental disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs). It is a disability that typically manifests within the first three years of life and significantly impacts one's ability to communicate and interact with others. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate the prevalence of autism to be 1 out of every 150 children, with the prevalence being four times higher in boys. Being a parent to an autistic child can be scary and daunting yet help and support is available.

What to Look for:

Autism symptoms range from mild to debilitating. The three hallmark characteristics of autism are impaired social interactions, impaired verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive or stereotyped behaviors. Symptoms include:

- lack of interest in making friends
- difficulty with spontaneous or make-believe play
- inability to understand other's feelings
- delayed or no spoken language
- difficulty initiating or maintaining conversations
- repetitive use of words or phrases
- little or no eye contact
- difficulty interpreting meaning of tone of voice or facial expressions
- over-sensitive to sensory stimuli such as sound or touch
- self-stimulating such as body-rocking, twirling
- self-injury behaviors such as head-banding
- difficulty with changes in routine
- fixation on parts of objects
- reoccupation with certain topics

Possible Causes:

Autism is a brain disorder present from birth that affects the way the brain processes information. The cause of autism remains unknown and is likely due to a combination of factors including genetics, chemical imbalances, and chromosomal abnormalities. Much debate has recently arisen regarding a possible link between autism and vaccines yet evidence indicates no link. In fact, your child not receiving vaccines can itself lead to illness and even death. However, as concerned parents, you are encouraged to discuss this further with your pediatrician.

Treatment Options:

Autism is not curable; however, early and accurate diagnosis and treatment can help each individual achieve to their greatest potential. Given the complexity of autism, a comprehensive, multi-disciplinary evaluation is paramount for diagnosis and treatment.

- Psychiatric Services including using psychotropic medication to treat related conditions such as depression and to diminish problem behaviors.
- Neurological Evaluation for additional laboratory tests to rule out any brain abnormalities or related seizure disorders.
- Hearing Evaluation to ensure that an auditory deficit is not contributing to difficulties.
- Developmental Evaluation to identify delays and to recognize your child's current level of functioning.
- Speech Therapy to improve language and to communicate more effectively.
- Physical Therapy to improve gross motor skills and coordination.
- Occupational Therapy to improve fine motor skills and coordination and to enhance processing of sensory stimuli including sound and touch.
- Individual Therapy particularly behavioral training and management utilizing positive reinforcement and social skills training to enhance behavior and interactions.
- Psycho-Education to help understand the disorder, causes, presentation, and treatments.
- Family Therapy to facilitate an understanding, supportive, and nurturing environment to meet the unique needs of your child.
- Support Groups to seek guidance and encouragement from other parents.
- School Services set forth under the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act to implement classroom based accommodations to facilitate your child achieving to their fullest potential.

Autism versus other ASDs:

A diagnosis of autism is based upon the unique presentation of symptoms. For example, children demonstrating some symptoms, yet not enough to warrant an autism diagnosis may be diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder. Or children with autistic symptoms yet well-developed language skills may be diagnosed with Aspergers Disorder. That is why a comprehensive assessment is warranted.

