

Autistic Disorder¹

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What Is Autistic Disorder?

Autistic Disorder, also known as Autism, begins in childhood, and is a disease that affects communication, social interaction, and behavior. It is part of the autism spectrum of disorders, which includes other disorders similar to Autistic Disorder that also cause developmental disabilities. These other disorders include Asperger's Disorder and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, Not Otherwise Specified.

In order for a diagnosis of Autistic Disorder to be given, problems in the following areas need to occur before the age of three:

- *Social interaction:*

Children with Autistic Disorder have trouble relating to others. For some children, this means that they don't seem to enjoy the company of others, don't seem to want to share or interact with others, or do not use nonverbal skills (eye contact, touching, facial expression, etc.) in the expected way.

- *Communication:*

Many children with Autistic Disorder show a delay in their language development, and some may never use language at all. However, just because there are delays in language development does not mean that the child has Autistic Disorder. Many children show delays in their language development, or speech difficulties, but do not have Autistic Disorder. In some cases, children with Autistic Disorder develop language skills, but use language in unusual ways. They may repeat certain words over and over, or be unable to have meaningful conversations.

- *Behavior and interests:*

Another sign of Autistic Disorder is unusual behaviors or interests. For some children this may mean obsession with certain objects, and for others it may mean an inability to handle changes in routine. Some children engage in unusual behavior, such as hand flapping, rocking, head banging, or walking on tiptoe.

Although all children with Autistic Disorder have impairment in all three areas, the exact symptoms are different for each child. Most children show problems relatively early on, but around 20% of the time children may seem to develop normally for

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the first year or two before showing signs of Autistic Disorder. By the age of five, most cases of Autistic Disorder have been diagnosed.

It is also notable that many children (around 62%) who are diagnosed with Autistic Disorder also are diagnosed with at least one other disorder, such as mental retardation, epilepsy, or cerebral palsy. Other symptoms that tend to go along with Autistic Disorder include eating things that are not food (such as rocks and dirt), unusual responses to sensory input (touch, sound, taste, sight), emotional behavior without known cause, strange sleeping habits, hyperactivity, self-injuring behaviors, and lack of fear of dangerous situations.

How Common Is It?

What we think of as Autistic Disorder today has been around for ages, but it was first used as a diagnosis by child psychiatrist Dr. Leo Kanner in 1943. The way we have defined and diagnosed Autistic Disorder has changed somewhat since that time. Recently there has been an increase in the number of documented cases of Autistic Disorder in the United States, and some (but not most) of that may be due to the way we define and diagnose this disorder today.

For a long time, the rate of Autistic Disorder was thought to be around 1 in 2,000. However, recent studies are showing the rate to be much higher. According to the most recent data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2007), around 1 in 150 to 1 in 166 children in the U.S. have been diagnosed with some sort of autistic spectrum disorder. In studies conducted in Europe and Scandinavia, the rates found are nearly double that of the United States.

Boys are much more likely to have Autistic Disorder than girls. In fact, autism is four times more common in boys than in girls. No one yet knows why boys are more likely to have Autistic Disorder.

What Causes Autistic Disorder?

There has been much research on the causes of Autistic Disorder, but there is still a lot that we do not know about it. What we do know is that the disorder

seems to be related to problems with neurological development and functioning. There is also a strong genetic component to this disorder: if one identical twin has Autistic Disorder, there is a 75% chance that the other twin (who shares almost exactly the same genes) also will have the disorder. If the twins are not identical (they have different genes) then there is only a 3-5% chance that the other twin will have the disorder.

There are certain medical conditions that seem to be associated with higher rates of Autistic Disorder, including Fragile X Syndrome, untreated phenylketonuria (PKU), tuberous sclerosis, and congenital rubella. Children whose mothers took thalidomide during pregnancy also have higher rates of the disorder. Some people also suspect that certain vaccinations are causing Autistic Disorder. However, most research studies suggest that vaccinations are not responsible for the increasing numbers of children diagnosed with this disorder, although research on this topic is ongoing.

What Do I Do If I Think My Child Has Autistic Disorder?

It is becoming common practice for pediatricians to screen for autistic spectrum disorders during office visits. If your pediatrician does not normally screen for these disorders, bring your concerns regarding the disorder to your doctor, and ask that he or she perform a screening. If your child is showing a lot of symptoms, you will be referred to another expert for a more in-depth evaluation. If you do not have a regular pediatrician, you can contact the Early Intervention team in your area (if your child is under the age of three) or the child's school (if the child is age three or older) and ask about evaluation. A good place to start to find the appropriate contacts in your area is the Florida Diagnostic and Learning Resources System (<http://www.paec.org/fdlrsweb/>).

There is no medical test that can show whether a child has Autistic Disorder. The diagnosis is based on a report of behaviors and observation, so an evaluation will include your history of the child, questions about your child's behavior and development, observation by a trained specialist, and possibly an evaluation of your child using one or

more tests of developmental level, language, and neurological functioning.

Although there is no known cure for Autistic Disorder, there are treatments that have been shown to improve outcomes for children diagnosed with this disorder. The research on treatment is ongoing, so check with the experts who diagnose the disorder to get recommendations on the best available treatment for your child. Autistic Disorder can be diagnosed as early as 18 months of age. The earlier it is diagnosed and the sooner intervention is provided, the better the outcome seems to be for the child.

How Will This Disorder Impact My Family?

Having a child with Autistic Disorder can be very stressful for parents. It's important for parents to take good care of their physical and emotional needs so that they will be able to continue to meet the demands of taking care of their child(ren). During times of stress or crisis, it is natural for us to start neglecting our own needs, but raising a child is something that goes on for the long term, and those who neglect themselves for too long will have problems. Seeking support from family, friends, neighbors, the community, and therapists is important. Couples should make sure to pay special attention to their relationship, because having a child with Autistic Disorder seems to put parents at higher risk for divorce. Finally, other family members, especially siblings and grandparents, may also struggle with this issue, and need both education and support.

Despite the potential challenges, raising a child with Autistic Disorder can also be very rewarding. Many children show improvement in their symptoms through treatment, and as they age. There are some children with Autistic Disorder who improve so much that they are able to lead "normal" lives.

Internet Resources

A Parent Guide to No Child Left Behind:
<http://www.adi.org/download.html>

Association for Science in Autism Treatment:
<http://www.asatonline.org>

Autism National Committee (AUTCOM):
<http://www.autcom.org>

Autism Network International (ANI):
<http://ani.autistics.org>

Autism Research Institute (ARI):
<http://www.autismresearchinstitute.com>

Autism Society of America:
<http://www.autism-society.org>

Autism Speaks/National Alliance for Autism Research: <http://www.autismspeaks.org>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Autism Information Center:
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/>

Cure Autism Now (CAN) Foundation:
<http://www.cureautismnow.org>

Family Village:
<http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index.html>

Family Voices: <http://www.familyvoices.org/>

Indiana Resource Center for Autism:
<http://www.iidc.indiana.edu/irca/fmain1.html>

MAAP Services for Autism, Asperger's, and PDD: <http://www.maapservices.org>

National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: <http://www.nichcy.org>

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD): Autism Spectrum Disorders:
<http://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/asd.cfm>

National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke: Autism Information Page:
<http://www.ninds.nih.gov/disorders/autism/autism.htm>

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders Clearinghouse:
<http://www.nidcd.nih.gov>

National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH):
Publications on Autism Spectrum Disorders:

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/publisting.cfm?dID=3>

Organization for Autism Research:

<http://www.researchautism.org>

Parent to Parent for Autism:

<http://hometown.aol.com/parentschat/homepage.html>

Social Security Disability Starter Kits:

http://www.socialsecurity.gov/disability/disability_starter_kits.htm

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