

Autism encompasses a broad range of brain disorders that affects 1 in 500 children. Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD's) include Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), Rett Syndrome (which affects only girls) and autism. Autism Spectrum Disorders impair three main areas of human development: **speech, communication, and social interaction**. These impairments may range from mild to severe.

Autism is the third most-common type of developmental delay in the United States. Autism is typically diagnosed when a child is between 18 and 36 months old.

What Is Autism?

Autism is a spectrum disorder that affects the child's ability to communicate, process thoughts, and interact socially.

Autism is characterized by:

- **Poor language and speech skills:** Children on the autism spectrum may lack speech altogether or may be delayed in their acquisition and use of language. They may repeat words (echolalia) in place of normal verbal communication. Some individuals with autism never develop gestures such as pointing to requested objects or waving good-bye. Children on the autism spectrum may find it difficult or impossible to hold a conversation or may compulsively steer the conversation to one subject.
- **Poor social communication:** here may be a lack of response to verbal requests or no response when the person's name is called. Similarly, they often fail to connect to the names for other people and they often confuse pronouns. Almost universally, individuals on the autistic continuum are unable to interpret facial expressions or emotions. They may establish only fleeting eye contact, if they any at all. They also often experience difficulty transitioning from one activity to another.
- **Poor social interaction/ repetitive behavior and interests:** Many individuals with autism lack interest in socially interactions. For children, there can be a lack of imaginative play and a preference to engage in repetitive activities for extended periods of time such as rewinding videos, stacking blocks, or lining up toys. Many individuals on the spectrum are perceived to be aloof or indifferent to other people.

What Causes Autism?

There isn't one specific cause of autism. Currently research is focusing on whether chemical imbalances, differences in the brain, genetics, or problems with the immune system play a role in causing the disorder.

Food allergies, excessive amounts of yeast in the digestive tract, and exposure to environmental toxins have all been mentioned as causes of autism. But there is no scientific evidence to support this.

Some people believe that thimerisol (a vaccine ingredient) and vaccines - particularly the shot for measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) - may be linked to autism because the same age range in which kids are vaccinated with MMR is the same age range in which autism is diagnosed. But there isn't any scientific evidence to support that link and, in fact, the main 1998 study that reported it was widely discredited in March 2004.

How Is Autism Diagnosed?

Autism can't be detected at birth or through any prenatal screening. But researchers do know that if you have one child with autism, you have about a 10% chance of having another child with autism or a similar disorder.

Because autism is difficult to recognize and diagnose, it's important that families seek an evaluation by a medical professional who is experienced in diagnosing and treating the disorder as soon as possible. If, for example, you're concerned because your child is nearing 12-15 months old and isn't gesturing, it's important not to wait to express concerns until the 18-month well-child visit. If there is something wrong, early intervention can help you find ways to manage your child's symptoms.

If you have concerns throughout infancy and the early toddler months - particularly about the way your child is learning to communicate - be sure to closely document your observations and talk with your child's doctor promptly.

There is no single diagnostic test for autism, so the doctor will probably order different tests to rule out other medical problems before making a diagnosis, and also may refer you to a developmental pediatrician, a pediatric psychiatrist, or a pediatric neurologist.

What causes autism?

No one is sure what causes autism but research seems to suggest that it is caused by both genetic and environmental factors such as vaccines or environmental toxins.

Is there a cure?

At present, there is no known cure for autism. Researchers from the USA, Canada, and the UK hope to better understand the disorder's biochemical origins and find a cure before 2010.

Many parents find that their children's symptoms and behaviors improve with the elimination of gluten and casein from diet and with the addition of nutritional supplements.

Autism Today does not endorse any one method of treatment, but we are dedicated to examining the latest research and methods of treatments that allow you to make an informed choice.

Where can I get more information?

Educating yourself and others about autism is a critical way to enhance the wellbeing of individuals with autism. We believe that grassroots advocacy and one-on-one "consciousness raising" helps society at large better understand the nature of this common developmental disorder and opens more doors of opportunity for people on the autism spectrum.