



What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that affects people's ability to understand what they see, hear, and otherwise sense. Autistic individuals typically have difficulty understanding verbal and nonverbal communication and learning appropriate ways of relating to people, objects, and events. Autism is a spectrum that affects individuals differently and with varying degrees of severity; no two people with autism are the same. While typically diagnosed in children, autism is a lifelong disorder that affects individuals of all ages. Autism is often found in combination with other disabilities.

Signs and Symptoms

People with autism may struggle with social, behavioral, and communication skills. They might repeat behaviors and might not understand change in their daily activities. Many autistic people also have different ways of learning, paying attention, or reacting to things.

A person with autism might:

- have severe language deficits or differences
- talk about or show interest in a restricted range of topics
- not point at objects to show interest
- not look at objects when another person points at them
- have trouble relating to others or not have an interest in other people at all
- avoid eye contact and want to be alone
- have trouble understanding other people's feelings or talking about their own feelings
- prefer not to be held or cuddled
- appear to be unaware when other people talk to them but respond to other sounds
- repeat or echo words or phrases said to them, or repeat words or phrases in place of normal language (echolalia)
- have trouble expressing their needs using typical words or motions
- laugh, cry, or show distress for no apparent reason
- repeat actions over and over again, often in a very stereotyped manner.
- have trouble adapting when a routine changes
- have unusual reactions to the way things smell, taste, look, feel, or sound
- be oversensitive or under-sensitive to pain
- lose skills they once had (for instance, stop saying words they were once using)

Prevalence

According to the CDC, 1 in 36 children may be diagnosed with autism in the United States. Autism occurs in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups, but is about four times more common among boys than among girls.

Causes

No one knows exactly what causes autism. Many researchers believe there is a strong genetic component. Some research suggests a physical problem that affects the parts of the brain that process language and information; other research points to an imbalance of brain chemicals. A variety of external and environmental triggers are also being studied. It is possible that autism is caused by a combination of several factors.

Diagnosis

An accurate diagnosis is made by observing and assessing an individual's communication, behavior, and social developmental levels. There are no medical tests that diagnose autism. However, because autism shares behavioral characteristics with other disorders, medical tests may be ordered to rule out other possible causes for the symptoms being exhibited. Caregiver input and developmental history are very important components in making an accurate diagnosis.

Treatment

Studies show that autistic individuals respond well to a highly structured, specialized education program tailored to their needs, and that early intervention provides the most positive outcomes. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is an empirically proven, effective therapeutic approach. Related evidence-based practices include visual supports, social narratives, and modeling. Often, treatments that may help to address co-occurring conditions include speech therapy, sensory therapy, occupational therapy, and medication. At this time, no cure has been found for autism. However, with individualized treatment, education, and support, children and adults with autism can improve and develop skills that will allow them to live and participate in their community.

More Information

For more information, please visit the Autism Society of North Carolina's website at autismsociety-nc.org.