



Fort Drum Medical Activity



PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

Autism

Topic Overview

What is autism?

Autism is a brain disorder that often makes it hard to communicate with and relate to others. With autism, the different areas of the brain fail to work together.

Most people with autism will always have some trouble relating to others. But early diagnosis and treatment have helped more and more people with autism to live independently as adults.

What causes autism?

Autism tends to run in families, so experts think it may be something that you inherit. Scientists are trying to find out exactly which genes may be responsible for passing down autism in families.

Other studies are looking at whether autism can be caused by other medical problems or by something in your child's surroundings.

Some people think that childhood vaccines cause autism, especially the measles-mumps-rubella, or MMR, vaccine. But studies have **not** shown this to be true. It's important to make sure that your child gets all childhood vaccines. They help keep your child from getting serious diseases that can cause harm or even death.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms almost always start before a child is 3 years old. Usually, parents first notice that their toddler has not started talking yet and is not acting like other children the same age.

Symptoms of autism include:

- A delay in learning to talk, or not talking at all. A child may seem to be deaf, even though hearing tests are normal.
- Repeated and overused types of behavior, interests, and play. Examples include repeated body rocking, unusual attachments to objects, and getting very upset when routines change.

There is no "typical" person with autism. People can have many different kinds of behaviors, from mild to severe. Parents often say that their child with autism prefers to play alone and does not make eye contact with other people.

Autism may also include other problems:

- Many children have [below-normal intelligence](#).
- Teenagers often become [depressed](#) and have a lot of [anxiety](#), especially if they have average or above-average intelligence.
- Some children get a seizure disorder such as [epilepsy](#) by their teen years.

How is autism diagnosed?

There are guidelines your doctor will use to see if your child has symptoms of autism. The guidelines put symptoms into three categories:

- **Social interactions and relationships.** For example, a child may have trouble making eye contact. People with autism may have a hard time understanding someone else's feelings, such as pain or sadness.
- **Verbal and nonverbal communication.** For example, a child may never speak. Or he or she may often repeat a certain phrase over and over.
- **Limited interests in activities or play.** For example, younger children often focus on parts of toys rather than playing with the whole toy. Older children and adults may be fascinated by certain topics, like train schedules or license plates.

Your child may also have a hearing test and some other tests to make sure that problems are not caused by some other condition.

How is it treated?

Treatment for autism involves special behavioral training. Behavioral training rewards good behavior (positive reinforcement) to teach children social skills and to teach them how to communicate and how to help themselves as they grow older.

With early treatment, most children with autism learn to relate better to others. They learn to communicate and to help themselves as they grow older.

Depending on the child, treatment may also include such things as speech therapy or physical therapy. Medicine is sometimes used to treat problems such as depression or obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

Exactly what type of treatment your child needs depends on the symptoms, which are different for each child and may change over time. Because people with autism are so different, something that helps one person may not help another. So it's important to work with everyone involved in your child's education and care to find the best way to manage symptoms.

How can your family deal with having a child with autism?

An important part of your child's treatment plan is making sure that other family members get training about autism and how to manage symptoms. Training can reduce family stress and help your child function better. Some families need more help than others.

Take advantage of every kind of help you can find. Talk to your doctor about what help is available where you live. Family, friends, public agencies, and autism organizations are all possible resources.

Remember these tips:

- Plan breaks. Daily demands of caring for a child with autism can take their toll. Planned breaks will help the whole family.
- Get extra help when your child gets older. The teen years can be a very hard time for children with autism.

- Get in touch with other families who have children with autism. You can talk about your problems and share advice with people who will understand.

Raising a child with autism is hard work. But with support and training, your family can learn how to cope.

Frequently Asked Questions

Learning about autism:

- [What is autism?](#)
- [What causes it?](#)
- [What are the symptoms?](#)
- [Who is affected?](#)
- [What are other types of developmental disorders?](#)
- [What is the difference between autism and Asperger's syndrome?](#)
- [Can vaccinations cause autism?](#)

Being diagnosed:

- [How is autism diagnosed?](#)
- [Are there any tests to screen for general developmental disorders?](#)
- [What questions will the doctor ask about my child's medical history?](#)
- [Are there guidelines for making a diagnosis?](#)
- [What tests are used to examine a child's behavior?](#)
- [What will my child's doctor look for during a physical exam?](#)

Getting treatment:

- [What kinds of treatment are used for autism?](#)
- [What are some steps parents can take to help a child with autism?](#)
- [What medicines are used?](#)
- [How do I know if an alternative treatment is good for my child?](#)

Ongoing concerns:

- [What kinds of training programs can help a child with autism?](#)

Living with autism:

- [What kind of support will I need?](#)
- [How can I help my child in school?](#)
- [What kind of care is available for adults with autism?](#)

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