

Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a developmental condition of the brain that affects language development, social interaction, and behavior. This condition causes various autism spectrum disorders (ASD) that range from mild to severe. Autism (or ASD) occurs in as many as 1 in 150 children. Males are four times more likely to have autism than females. It is estimated that over 1.5 million persons in the United States currently have some form of ASD.



What causes autism?

Although, the cause of autism is not known, scientists believe that it is caused by a combination of genetic factors (something you are born with) and the environment. What is certain is that parents are not to blame! Vaccines have also been ruled out as a cause.

What are the characteristics of autism?

There are many characteristics of autism. Some individuals with autism have only a few characteristics and are mildly affected. Other individuals have many of the symptoms, causing a severe disability. Most individuals with ASD have difficulty with language, social interaction, and behavior. Some other characteristics are:

- lack of pretend or social play
- repetitive or unusual movements (hand-flapping, rocking)
- toe walking
- repetitive or unusual language
- unusual interests
- fascination with certain objects or topics
- need for routine
- unusual response to sound, touch and taste (such as distress with loud sounds, unwillingness to be touched, or aversion to texture in foods)
- lack of eye contact during social interactions
- sleep problems
- difficulty making friends with peers
- difficulty having a conversation with others

There are several signs in young children that suggest that they need to be evaluated for autism.

These include the following:

- lack of eye contact at any age
- lack of babbling between 6-12 months
- lack of pointing for communication by 12 months
- lack of any words by 18 months
- loss of language at any age

What is the treatment for autism?

Although there is no known cure for autism, evidence shows that early intervention is very successful in improving communication abilities and life skills in children with ASD. Speech-language therapy and occupational therapy can be very helpful. Other available treatments include behavioral approaches, such as applied behavior analysis (ABA) and developmental interventions. Medicine is sometimes used to treat ASD symptoms. No single treatment is best for all children. Treatment should be tailored to meet the child's individual needs.

The ultimate goal of treatment is to help the child achieve independence and to improve the child's quality of life. A secondary goal of therapy is to lessen the challenges and family stress that can occur. The good news is that with early therapeutic intervention and special education programs, many individuals with ASD achieve self-care, social, and job skills so that they can live enjoyable lives and contribute to their communities.

What can parents do to help?

The purpose of speech-language therapy is to help the child with ASD maximize his or her ability to develop communication skills, using the best method possible. For these skills to become easy enough to be used in communication, frequent stimulation and practice between therapy sessions is necessary. Parents can incorporate practice of skills developed in therapy into daily activities at home. The success of therapy depends on how much the child practices the new communication skills between therapy sessions.

Websites on autism:

- Autism Society of Greater Cincinnati: www.autismcincy.org.
- Autism Society of America: www.autism-society.org
- Autism Speaks: <http://www.autismspeaks.org>
- Kelly O'Leary Center : <http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/service/k/autism/default/>
<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/patients/child/special-needs/medical/disabilities/a/>
(Cincinnati Children's database with information about a range of issues faced by families of children with special needs)

For more information, please contact the Division of Speech Pathology at (513) 636-4341 or visit our website at www.cincinnatichildrens.org/speech.