

## What is autism?

Autism is a developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is a neurological disorder that affects the development of the brain, causing difficulty with communication, learning, and social interaction. It is one of several autism spectrum disorders (ASD) — also known as pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) — that include Asperger's Syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).

## What are the symptoms of autism?

- **Communication:** language develops slowly or not at all; gestures used instead of words. Sometimes there is a loss of language or regression.
- **Social Interaction:** may spend time alone; shows little interest in making friends.
- **Sensory Impairment:** unusual reactions to physical sensations, overly sensitive to touch.
- **Behaviors:** overactive or very passive; frequent tantrums for no apparent reason; obsessed with a single item, idea, or person; lack of common sense; aggressive or self-injurious behavior.

## How prevalent is autism?

The number of diagnosed cases of autism and similar disorders has dramatically increased over the past decade. The most recent studies (CDC, 2009) report that the incidence rate for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is one in every 110 children in the United States. ASDs are the second most common serious developmental disability, following mental retardation. Autism is four times more likely to occur in boys than in girls.

## How is autism diagnosed?

There are no medical tests for diagnosing autism, but when parents become concerned about developmental delays in children, they should consult a physician. He or she can rule out various potential medical causes, such as hearing and/or voice problems.

Before a child can be diagnosed with autism, he or she should be evaluated by a multi-disciplinary team that may include a neurologist, psychologist, developmental pediatrician, speech/language therapist, learning specialist, or another professional knowledgeable about the disorder. The diagnosis of autism is made when a certain number of characteristics listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-IV) are present in ranges inap-

propriate for the child's age. A diagnosis of PDD-NOS may be made when a child exhibits fewer symptoms than in autism, although the symptoms may be similar to a child with an autism diagnosis.

## What causes autism?

Although one specific cause of autism is not known, current research links autism to biological or neurological differences in the brain. Autism is believed to have a genetic basis, although no specific gene has been directly linked to the disorder. Researchers are using advanced brain-imaging technology to examine environmental factors that may contribute to the development of autism. MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scans can show abnormalities in the structure of the brain, with significant cellular differences in the cerebellum.

## What treatments are recommended?

Most researchers agree that the sooner a child with autism begins an intervention program, the better. At this time, the best approach for autism treatment should involve special educators, psychologists, and speech and occupational therapists. Although medications are sometimes

used to manage problematic behaviors of autism, there are currently no medications that effectively treat the core symptoms.

A mainstay of an effective intervention program is applied behavior analysis or ABA. In ABA, scientifically established principles of learning and behavior are combined to address the primary areas of concern in autism — communication, social development, learning, and behavior problems.

## How can parents find the right program?

Parents should look for a program that provides:

- Direct consultation by senior clinicians (doctoral-level psychologists and Board Certified Behavior Analysts).
- A clear understanding of the function of behavior problems.
- Staff who can clearly describe the design and implementation of an intervention.
- Approaches that are referenced in the professional literature.

Families should strive to create a professional working relationship with educators and clinicians. Autism is a long journey and a partner can make all the difference. Look for professionals who are knowledgeable, caring, and can work well with school administrators.

## Additional resources include:

- National Autism Center ([www.nationalautismcenter.org](http://www.nationalautismcenter.org))
- Autism Society of America ([www.autism-society.org](http://www.autism-society.org))
- National Alliance for Autism Research ([www.naar.org](http://www.naar.org))
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) [key word “autism”])
- Doug Flutie Jr. Foundation ([www.dougflutiejrfoundation.org](http://www.dougflutiejrfoundation.org))
- Family Village ([www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index](http://www.familyvillage.wisc.edu/index))
- Financial Planning ([www.specialneedsplanning.com](http://www.specialneedsplanning.com))

## Facts about autism:

- ▶ occurs in one in every 110 births
- ▶ is more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined
- ▶ occurs in all races, ethnicities, and social groups
- ▶ is considered a “national public health crisis” by the CDC
- ▶ currently has no known cause or cure

Effective treatments are available for children, adolescents, and adults on the autism spectrum; early intervention services are critical to a child’s long-term success.

[www.mayinstitute.org](http://www.mayinstitute.org)

*May Institute is a nonprofit organization that provides educational, rehabilitative, and behavioral healthcare services to individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities, brain injury, mental illness, and behavioral health needs. Since its founding 55 years ago, May Institute has evolved into an award-winning national network that serves over 25,000 individuals and their families every year at more than 200 service locations in the Northeast, Southeast, and on the West Coast. The Institute operates several schools for children and adolescents with autism and other developmental disabilities. They are located in Randolph, West Springfield, and Woburn, Massachusetts; and Santa Cruz, California.*

For more information, contact May Institute at 800-778-7601 or [info@mayinstitute.org](mailto:info@mayinstitute.org).