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Autism

Overview

What is autism?

Autism is a brain disorder that affects the development of normal social and communication skills. People who have autism have trouble communicating and interacting with other people, starting at an early age.

Signs of autism can vary from person to person. They can also be worse in some people than in others. Some of the more common signs are listed in the Symptoms section. People can be said to have "low-functioning autism" or "high-functioning autism," depending upon the severity of their symptoms and the results of an IQ (intelligence) test. High-functioning autism describes autism with less severe symptoms, while low-functioning autism describes autism with more severe symptoms.

If my child has autism, does it mean that he or she is mentally retarded?

Many children who have autism are also mentally retarded, but others are not. It can be hard to test autistic children because they do not respond to questions in the same way other children do. An autism expert can give your child special tests that will tell you more about his or her condition. Some autistic children have special skills, such as the ability to do complex math problems in their heads. However, abilities like these are very rare.

Are there more cases of autism now than there used to be?

More children are being diagnosed with autism. However, it's not clear if this really means that more children have autism. It may mean that parents, teachers and doctors are better at recognizing the signs of autism.

If I have one child with autism, am I more likely to have another one?

Brothers and sisters of children who have autism have about a 5% chance of developing autism themselves. There also seems to be a higher risk (10% to 40%) of another disability, such as a learning disability, in siblings of children who have autism.

If you're thinking about having more children, talk with your doctor about whether it would help you to talk with a genetic counselor.

What is Asperger's syndrome (AS)?

Asperger's syndrome (AS) is a condition very similar to high-functioning autism. Typically, people who have AS have a normal IQ and some may exhibit an exceptional skill or interest in a particular area. While verbal language development is considered normal, people who have AS can have trouble using this language correctly in social situations. They may also have difficulty communicating

in nonverbal ways, such as making eye contact, understanding facial expressions and using body gestures. General social skills such as developing relationships and adjusting to new situations can also be affected. Even so, people who have AS can often learn how to deal with their difficulties through behavior and communication therapy.

Symptoms

What are the symptoms of autism?

Common symptoms of autism include the following:

- Avoids cuddling or making eye contact
- Does not respond to voices or other sounds
- Does not respond to his or her name
- Does not talk or does not use language properly
- Rocks back and forth, spins or bangs his or her head
- Stares at parts of an object, such as the wheels of a toy car
- Does not understand hand gestures or body language
- Does not pretend or play make-believe games
- Is very concerned with order, routine or ritual and becomes upset if routine is disturbed or changed
- Has a flat facial expression or uses a monotone voice
- Injures himself or herself or is unafraid of danger

Causes & Risk Factors

What causes autism?

Doctors aren't sure what causes autism. Some studies have shown that the cause is genetic (runs in families). Certain medical problems or something in your child's surroundings may also play a role. In many cases, the cause of a child's autism is never known. Boys are more likely than girls to have autism. As doctors continue to study autism, they may learn more about what causes it.

Can vaccines cause autism?

No. Good research has shown that there is no link between autism and childhood vaccinations ("shots") such as the measles, mumps and rubella (MMR) vaccine.

Vaccines are an important part of your child's health. If you have concerns about the safety of vaccines, talk to your doctor.

A note about vaccines

Sometimes the amount of a certain vaccine cannot keep up with the number of people who need it. [More info...](#)

My baby seemed fine. Why does he or she seem to have autism now?

We don't know why it happens, but approximately 20% of children who have autism seem to develop normally for the first 1 to 2 years of their lives. Then, these babies experience what doctors call a regression. This means that they lose abilities that they had before, such as the ability to talk.

Diagnosis & Tests

How is autism diagnosed?

There is no lab test that can detect autism. Autism often is diagnosed when a baby or toddler doesn't behave as expected for his or her age. If your doctor thinks your child has autism, he or she will probably suggest that your child see a child psychiatrist or other specialist. The specialist will probably observe your child to see if he or she shows signs of autism.

Treatment

How is autism treated?

Children don't "outgrow" autism, and it cannot be cured. There is no medicine that treats autism itself, but medicine may help with some of the symptoms of autism, such as aggressive behavior or sleeplessness.

Research has shown that very intense behavior and language therapy may help some children. With therapy, some children may improve as they mature. The individual child's language skills and overall intellectual level may help predict what will happen with his or her case of autism. Talk to your doctor about what kind of treatment is best for your child.

Other Organizations

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- My child has autism. Should I consider not having another child?
- What can I do to help my child develop language skills?
- It's hard to feel close to my child when he/she won't look at me or talk to me. Are there support groups I can join?
- Will my child be able to attend a regular school?
- What are autism spectrum disorders?
- What is the best way to interact with my child?
- My child doesn't sleep well. What can I do to help?
- Do you have any material I could read to help my family and friends deal with my child's autism?
- My child sometimes become violent. What is the best way to deal with this?