

Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is Autism?

Autism is a term used to describe a group of complex developmental brain disorders known as Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD). The other pervasive developmental disorders are PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified), Asperger Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. These are more commonly referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorders.

Statistics

According to the Centers for Disease Control, Autism affects an average of 1 in 110 children. Boys are at an even higher risk at 1 in 70. Younger siblings of children on the Autism Spectrum have a 1 in 5 chance of developing the disorder. Autism is the fastest growing developmental disorder in the United States. It is more common than childhood cancer, juvenile diabetes, and pediatric AIDS combined. An estimated 1.5 million individuals in the US alone are affected. These statistics represent an estimated 600% increase in the past 20 years with the current rate of increase being 10-17% annually. There is not an established explanation for the increase, although improved diagnosis and environmental influences are two reasons often considered.

Possible Cause(s)

The simple answer is we don't know what causes Autism. The best scientific evidence available today points toward a combination of factors such as a genetic predisposition and exposure to an undetermined environmental factor. There have been many theories, some highly controversial, as to what the environmental factor(s) could be.

Signs & Symptoms

It is possible for a child to be diagnosed with an ASD as early as 12 months of age. Early indicators of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) include the following;

- No big smiles or other warm, joyful expressions by six months
- No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles, or other facial expressions by nine months
- No babbling by 12 months
- No back-and-forth gestures, such as pointing, showing, reaching, or waving by 12 months
- No words by 16 months
- No two-word meaningful phrases (without imitating or repeating) by 24 months
- Any loss of speech, babbling, or social skills at any age
- Lack of response to name
- Repetitive movements with objects, body, arms, hands, or fingers
- Odd/unusual intonation, pitch, rhythm, & voice quality

Other traits often associated with individuals on the Autism Spectrum include; toe walking, lack of eye contact, echolalia (repeating phrases, memorized movie lines, etc...), issues with digestive tract (constipation/loose stools), rigidity with routine, and obsessions with objects.

Due to the lack of ability to communicate needs and wants effectively, individuals on the Autism Spectrum often exhibit challenging behaviors including physical aggression (hitting, biting, pushing, pinching), verbal aggression (loud screaming), and self injury (head banging, biting, hitting, pinching, scratching). In addition, individuals on the Autism Spectrum are often unaware and lack the fear of potential hazards in their environment (streets, hot stoves, lakes, and strangers) and they often participate in property destruction (breaking items, dumping items). The destructive behaviors are typically not purposeful, but are a result of the person exploring cause/effect or meeting a sensory need. Wandering is a very serious behavior affecting nearly all children on the Autism Spectrum. Due to these challenging behaviors, parents are often forced to provide constant supervision to ensure their safety.

Treatment

Early diagnosis is crucial because with proper intervention by the schools and medical field, it is possible for a child to gain the skills necessary to function in mainstream society. The school is able to offer early intervention services for children who qualify as young as one day old. Until the age of 3, school services are provided in the child's home. Referrals to Minnesota schools are coordinated by Help Me Grow (www.mnparentsknow.org).

Additional therapies provided to individuals on the Autism Spectrum often include; Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy (OT), and Physical Therapy (PT). There are many other therapies to choose from including; Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA), Relationship Development Intervention (RDI), Floortime (DIR), Hippotherapy (horse therapy), Music Therapy, Social Skills Groups, etc... In addition to these therapies, many individuals are on a Gluten (wheat)/Casein (dairy) Free (GFCF) diet. For some, the GFCF diet has improved their digestive tract problems and lessened the occurrence of behaviors.

Services/Funding

Families of children on the Autism Spectrum often struggle in finding appropriate care for their child as well as the funding needed to pay for the care and the items needed to ensure health and safety (fences, door alarms, therapy equipment, and communication tools). Many of the therapies/services for individuals on the Autism Spectrum are covered by private insurance or Medical Assistance (i.e. Speech, OT, PT, ABA, and Personal Care Attendant (PCA)). For services/items not covered by insurance, other options include; Grants (Family Support Grant, Consumer Support Grant) and Waivers (DD Waiver, CADI Waiver). Grants and Waivers are only available to individuals who receive Medical Assistance and have an open Social Services case. Vocational options for adults can range from competitive employment with minimal support to in center day programs with significant staffing support. Funding for vocational programs can come from Vocational Rehabilitation programs, waivers or county funding. Living situations can vary as well depending on a person's skills and independence. Some individuals live independently with minor adaptations or supports and some need 24 hour supervision with highly trained staff. Families and individuals should be in contact with their local social service agency at least two or three years prior to finishing school if they do not already have an open case. It is vitally important to have this time to discuss and plan for the transition into adult life from school.

Providing appropriate services and supports for individuals affected by Autism does not come cheap. According to a 2006 Harvard study, caring for an individual with Autism can cost an estimated \$3.2 million in their lifetime. Caring for all people with Autism over their lifetimes costs an estimated \$35 billion per year.

Supports

There are several groups that have been formed to provide support to families dealing with Autism. These include; Autism Society of MN, Autism Society of America, Autism Research Institute, and Autism Speaks to name a few. Locally, Autism Allies of Wright County (www.autismallies.org) was formed in 2009 in an effort to engage the community in strengthening supports and increasing awareness of Autism. Autism Allies has partnered with Buffalo Community Education to hold a monthly parent support group. For information about upcoming meetings, please visit the Buffalo Community Education website at www.bhmschool.org/community-ed.

References

First Signs – www.firstsigns.org Autism Society of MN – www.ausm.org
MN Parents Know – www.mnparentsknow.org Autism Allies of Wright County
– www.autismallies.org Autism Speaks – www.autismspeaks.org