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## Common Questions about Autism

What is Autism?

How common is Autism?

What are the signs of Autism?

What is the difference between Autism and PDD?

What is Asperger's Syndrome?

What causes Autism?

The national Autism Society of America web site also has tremendous information on diagnosis, education, treatment and living with autism.

### What is Autism?

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically appears during the first three years of life. It is the result of a neurological disorder that affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development in the areas of social interaction and communication skills. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and non-verbal communication, social interaction or play activities. One should keep in mind however, that autism is a spectrum disorder and each individual differently and at varying degrees - this is why early diagnosis is so crucial. Recognizing the signs, a child can begin benefiting from one of the many specialized intervention programs.

Autism is one of five disorders that falls under the umbrella of Pervasive Developmental Disorders, a category of neurological disorders characterized by "severe and pervasive impairment in all areas of development."

The five disorders under PDD are:

- Autistic Disorder
- Asperger's Disorder
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)
- Rett's Disorder
- PDD - Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)

Each of these disorders has specific diagnostic criteria which have been outlined in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic & Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR).

[top](#)

### How common is Autism?

Autism is the most common of the Pervasive Developmental Disorders, affecting an estimated 1 in 100 births (Centers for Disease Control Prevention, 2004). Roughly translated, this means as many as 1 in 100 children are born with autism.

million Americans today are believed to have some form of autism. And this number is on t

Based on statistics from the U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies growing at a startling rate of 10-17 percent per year. At this rate, the ASA estimates that t of autism could reach 4 million Americans in the next decade.

Autism knows no racial, ethnic, social boundaries, family income, lifestyle, or educational level affect any family, and any child. And although the overall incidence of autism is consistent globe, it is four times more prevalent in boys than in girls.

top

### **What are the signs and characteristics of Autism?**

As mentioned previously, autism is a spectrum disorder, and although it is defined by a certain behaviors, children and adults with autism can exhibit any combination of these behaviors of severity. Two children, both with the same diagnosis, can act completely different from each other and have varying capabilities.

You may hear different terms used to describe children within this spectrum, such as autistic tendencies, autism spectrum, high-functioning or low-functioning autism, more-abled or less-abled. More important than the term used to describe autism is understanding that whatever the diagnosis, children with autism can learn and function normally and show improvement with appropriate support and education.

Every person with autism is an individual, and like all individuals, has a unique personality and combination of characteristics. Some individuals mildly affected may exhibit only slight delays in language and greater challenges with social interactions. They may have difficulty initiating and maintaining a conversation. Their communication is often described as talking at others instead of to them. (For example, monologue on a favorite subject that continues despite attempts by others to interject comments).

People with autism also process and respond to information in unique ways. In some cases, repetitive and/or self-injurious behavior may be present. Persons with autism may also exhibit some of the following traits:

- Insistence on sameness; resistance to change
- Difficulty in expressing needs, using gestures or pointing instead of words
- Repeating words or phrases in place of normal, responsive language
- Laughing (and/or crying) for no apparent reason showing distress for reasons not apparent to others
- Preference to being alone; aloof manner
- Tantrums
- Difficulty in mixing with others
- Not wanting to cuddle or be cuddled
- Little or no eye contact
- Unresponsive to normal teaching methods
- Sustained odd play

- Spinning objects
- Obsessive attachment to objects
- Apparent over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to pain
- No real fears of danger
- Noticeable physical over-activity or extreme under-activity
- Uneven gross/fine motor skills
- Non responsive to verbal cues; acts as if deaf, although hearing tests in normal range

For most of us, the integration of our senses helps us to understand what we are experiencing. For example, our sense of touch, smell and taste work together in the experience of eating a peach. You feel the feel of the peach's skin, its sweet smell, and the juices running down your face. For children with autism, sensory integration problems are common, which may throw their senses off. They may be over-sensitive or under-sensitive. The fuzz on the peach may actually be experienced as painful and the smell may make them gag. Some children with autism are particularly sensitive to sound, finding even the most common noises painful. Many professionals feel that some of the typical autism behaviors, like the ones listed above, are actually a result of sensory integration difficulties.

There are also many myths and misconceptions about autism. Contrary to popular belief, not all children do make eye contact; it just may be less often or different from a non-autistic child. Many children with autism can develop good functional language and others can develop some typical communication skills, such as sign language or use of pictures.

Children do not "outgrow" autism but symptoms may lessen as the child develops and receives appropriate treatment. One of the most devastating myths about autistic children is that they cannot speak. While sensory stimulation is processed differently in some children, they can and do give answers. However, it may require patience on the parents' part to accept and give love in the child's

top

### **What is the difference between Autism and PDD?**

The term 'PDD' is widely used by professionals to refer to children with autism and related disorders. However, there is a great deal of disagreement and confusion among professionals concerning the label. Diagnosis of PDD, Autism, or any other developmental disability, is based upon the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - Fourth Edition (DSM-IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association, Washington D.C., 1994, the main diagnostic reference of Mental Health professionals in the United States of America.

According to the DSM-IV, the term 'PDD' is not a specific diagnosis, but an umbrella term under which there are several specific diagnoses, including Autistic Disorder; Rett's Disorder; Childhood Disintegrative Disorder; Asperger's Disorder; Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

top

### **What is Asperger's Syndrome?**

Asperger's Disorder is one of five Pervasive Development Disorders (PDDs), which also include Rett's Syndrome, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and PDD-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). These disorders are a category of neurologically-based disorders that have a range of delays in different developmental areas.

stages.

What distinguishes Asperger's Disorder from autism is the severity of the symptoms and the language delays. Children with Asperger's Disorder may be only mildly affected and frequent language and cognitive skills. To the untrained observer, a child with Asperger's Disorder is different.

top

### **What Causes Autism?**

There is no known single cause for autism, but it is generally accepted by the medical community that it is caused by abnormalities in brain structure or function. Brain scans show differences in the structure of the brain in autistic versus non-autistic children. Researchers are investigating various theories, including the link between heredity, genetics and medical problems. While no one has been identified as causing autism, in many families there appears to be a pattern of autism and other disabilities, further supporting a genetic basis to the disorder. Researchers are searching for segments of genetic code that autistic children may have inherited. It also appears that some children are born with a higher susceptibility to autism, but researchers have not yet identified a single factor that causes autism to develop.

Researchers are also investigating the possibility that, under certain conditions, a cluster of genes may interfere with brain development, resulting in autism. Still other researchers are investigating problems during pregnancy or delivery, as well as environmental factors such as viral infections, metabolic imbalances, and exposure to environmental chemicals.

Autism tends to occur more frequently than expected among individuals who have certain medical conditions, including Fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, congenital rubella syndrome, and phenylketonuria (PKU). Some harmful substances ingested during pregnancy have also been associated with an increased risk of autism. Early in 2002, The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) prepared a review of hazardous chemical exposures and autism and found no conclusive evidence for an association. However, there was very limited research and more needs to be done about chemicals.

The question regarding a relationship between vaccines and autism continues to be debated. A recent investigation by a committee of the Institute of Medicine concluded that the "evidence favors a causal relationship... between MMR vaccines and autistic spectrum disorders (ASD)." The committee, however, acknowledged that "they could not rule out" the possibility that the MMR vaccine may contribute to ASD in a small number of children. While other researchers agree the data do not show a link between the MMR and autism, they also agree more research is clearly needed.

Whatever the cause, it is clear that children with autism and PDD are born with the disorder and have the potential to develop it. Bad parenting does not cause it. It is not a mental illness. Children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. Furthermore, no known psychological factors in the development of a child have been shown to cause autism.

top

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