

Characteristics of autism spectrum disorder

[Health & Medicine](#), [Disease](#)



There are many diseases and disorders that plague today's society, but one of the most serious of those disorders is autism. Autism is not nearly as widely known as the familiar Down's Syndrome, yet, surprisingly, autism is far more widespread. In fact, autism is the third most common developmental disability, affecting 400,000 people worldwide (Autism Society of America). As of yet there is no cure for this debilitating disorder, only a variety of treatments. Autism is a developmental disability, not a mental illness, that typically appears during the first three years of life and affects 15 of every 10,000 individuals.

No one is certain why it occurs, but researchers have found that MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scans of people with autism show abnormalities in the structure of the brain. Significant abnormalities include differences in the cerebellum and in the size and number of Purkinje cells within the brain. Sometimes there is a pattern that exists within families from generation to generation. This indicates the possibility that autism is genetically related. However, no gene has been found. Every person with autism is different and there is no set type or typical person with autism.

This is because autism is a spectrum disorder, meaning that symptoms and characteristics of the disorder can present themselves in a variety of ways, from mild to severe. Usually children with autism have deficiencies in both verbal and non-verbal communication. Their language develops slowly or not at all and they have very short attention spans. They often lack social skills and will spend time alone, rather than with others. In more severe cases, children have unusual reactions to physical sensations such as being overly sensitive to touch or under responsive to pain.

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Most commonly, children with autism lack imagination and imitate other's ideas, rather than initiate their own. Lastly, behavior is greatly affected by autism. They may be overactive or very passive and throw frequent tantrums, injuring themselves, for no apparent reason other than to gather attention. They often lack common sense and show aggressive or violent behavior. While some people only show one or two symptoms, others have all or nearly all and find it extremely difficult to function in society.

People with autism do live normal lives and the behaviors associated may change or disappear over time. As of yet, there is no cure for autism.

However, with the proper treatment, many of the behaviors can be positively changed. Some of the treatments include behavioral training, teaching of communication and social skills, auditory training, medications, and a change in diet. Behavioral training or modification, as it is also called, deals with changing or extinguishing inappropriate behaviors and increasing positive behaviors. A few methods are used to do this.

One way is self-management where the individual monitors their behavior and receives self-reinforcement. Another method used is modeling. This is when the teacher or therapist demonstrates what is being done so the child can "model" the steps. Behavioral training is effective in stopping self-inflicted pain by shaping and distributing positive reinforcement. The teaching of communication and social skills is an integral part of treating autism. Speech therapy may include gaining language skills or learning sign language. Some devices are used frequently such as picture communication boards.

Another device is used with a trained professional supporting the hand or arm of the person helping them to punch keys on a device. This technique, called facilitated communication, is highly controversial because it is sometimes thought that the facilitator is directing the person's arm unknowingly. One of the main characteristics of autism is the lack of understanding of social cues (Autism Society of America). The person with autism may be taught how to communicate in social situations or respond to certain facial expressions and emotions.

If the emphasis is on social communication, a speech therapist will work closely with the child to ensure proper communication in social situations. Auditory training is sometimes used for those individuals who are oversensitive to sound. An audiologist plays a different variety of sound frequencies in this therapy. The frequencies coincide with the level of the child's impairment. Food allergies and sensitivities have been shown to produce a variety of symptoms associated with autism (Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities 1).

It appears that children with autism benefit from diets that are free of gluten and casein. This is possibly because the inability to adequately process these substances can result in disorders such as postpartum psychosis, schizophrenia, and autism (Reichelt & Landmark, 1994). When these processes are not properly metabolized a short chain of amino acids results. They may become active, and behaviors associated with autism result. A small portion of them will cross into the brain causing interference with the signals that account for normal activities.

Also many vitamins and minerals have proven to be effective in treating certain behaviors in children with autism because they do not get enough essential nutrients. Many medications are being tested everyday to find a treatment for the symptoms of autism. Some drugs have been effective for such things as stopping self-inflicted pain and other minor symptoms. None, though, have gotten to the source of the problem like the language deficits. Drug therapy is not one of the widely used treatments for autism because there are better methods that allow for more progress. There are still many unanswered questions about autism and its treatments.

Sometimes the symptoms can lessen or disappear as the child ages. The majority of people however, will continue to show symptoms throughout their lives. There is not one sure treatment for every person with autism, since every person may have different symptoms. What works for one person may or may not work for another and it is imperative to talk with a doctor about what treatment option will work best with a certain combination of symptoms. Although this is a debilitating disorder, individuals who find the right treatment plan for themselves can lead a normal life.