

Autism



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Autism

Throughout the years the diagnosis of autism has changed dramatically. Once, it was mistakenly diagnosed as childhood schizophrenia. Now that much more extensive research has been done, researchers have found distinct characteristics that are typical of autistic individuals.

It is most often characterized by difficulty in the child's ability to respond to people, events, and objects. Responses to sensations of light, sound, and feeling may be exaggerated. Delayed speech and language may be associated. Other characteristics include: impairment in ability to make peer friendships, absence of imaginative activity, stereotyped body movements, persistent preoccupation with parts of objects, marked distress over changes in trivial aspects of the environment, unreasonable insistence on following routines in precise detail, a restricted range of interests and a preoccupation with one narrow interest, along with many others.

Although certain characteristics are typical of autistic children, the diagnosis is a multidisciplinary effort. The diagnosis requires a team of professionals because of the many unique characteristics and behaviors of the autistic child. Each professional is assigned a different behavior to monitor. However, the psychiatrist and the psychologist are mainly responsible for the diagnosis and the psychological evaluations involved. The onset of this condition is usually observed within the first two and a half years.

In 1968, the APA referred to autism as a single disorder, and now it is known to be a syndrome of behavioral and medical effects. Along with autism, several related disorders are grouped under Pervasive Developmental Disorders, PDD, a general category which is characterized by severe and

pervasive impairment in several areas of development. The standard reference is known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, DSM, which is now in its fourth edition. The DSM classifies the different types of PDD which are often mistaken as autism. The other PDD are Asperger's Disorder, Rett's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified, PDD-NOS, which is commonly referred to as atypical autism. The term autistic spectrum disorder is frequently used to acknowledge the diversity and severity of autism. The characteristics and symptoms of autism can present themselves in a wide variety of combinations. There is no standard type and no such thing as a typical person with autism. The most commonly used terms to describe people with autism are: autistic-like, autistic tendencies, autistic spectrum, high functioning, or low functioning, and more-abled or less-abled.

Autistic disorder is also known as Infantile Autism or Kanner's Syndrome. Most children with this condition exhibit poor social skills, and impaired cognitive functioning and language. What is it that causes this national crisis, affecting over 400,000 families, and costing the nation over 13 billion dollars. Autism is the third most common developmental disorder, more common than Down Syndrome, multiple sclerosis, or cystic fibrosis, and autism research still receives less than 5% of the funding of the other diseases. With the lack of funding, researchers from all over the world are spending a considerable amount of time and energy trying to find answers. A single specific cause of autism is still not known. The most current research links autism to neurological or biological differences in the brain, and in many families a pattern of autism or autism related disabilities appears. This could suggest

that autism has a genetic basis, although no specific gene has been directly linked to autism. Researchers believe that a genetic basis would be highly complex, involving a combination of several genes. Direct causes have not been discovered, but several theories has been proven false. Autism is not a mental disorder, children with autism are not unruly kids who choose not to behave. Autism is not caused by bad parenting, and no known psychological factors in child development have been proven to cause autism.

Children with autism begin to show signs of this disease at around the age of two. This is when parents may notice delays in language, play, or social interaction. One of the many problems autistic children have is with social detachment and unresponsiveness. Autistic babies do not smile at there parents or reach out to be cuddled or picked up. They often do not play with other children, appearing to be in there their own world, unaware of people or events around them. Many children may never develop normal concern for the feelings of others.

Language develops very slowly or in 40% of autistic children not at all. They often use gestures instead of words or use words, but without attaching the usual meaning. Some autistic children have echolalia. This is when the child will repeat back what someone has just said. This repeating of what was just said, is also thought to be a way for the child to express the word yes. Their voices are normally mechanical or robot like.

People with autism do not like it when their physical surroundings or daily routines are changed. They are dependent on their every day routines, and may have tantrums if things are out of place. Older autistic people may engage in the same hobby or have a set topic of conversation such as train

schedules or road maps. Unusual movements and mechanical fascination are others signs of autism. Children will repeat the same motions over and over again, such as: twirling about, rocking back and forth, waving their arms, or flicking their fingers. They may also be hyperactive, moving from place to place with no apparent purpose. Physical objects seem to be more interesting them than people. Some autistic people will become attached to a certain object, carrying it around at all times, or become obsessed by a particular activity such as flushing a toilet or turning a light switch on and off.

Autism is also characterized by self-injurious behavior. This refers to any behavior that can cause tissue damage, such as bruises, redness and open wounds. The most common forms of these behaviors include head-banging, hand-biting, and excessive scratching or rubbing. There are two major sets of theories on why people engage in self-injury: physiological and social. The physiological theorists believe that these behaviors may release beta-endorphins in the person's brain, which in turn, provides the person with a form of internal pleasure. Another theory is that sudden episodes of self-injury may be caused by sub-clinical seizures. An infection of the middle ear is thought to be a cause of the head banging or ear hitting. The last theory is that some forms of self-injury may be a result of over arousal (such as frustration). It acts as a release, and lowers arousal. The social theorists have a different perspective on self-injurious behavior. They believe that the autistic individuals engage in these behaviors to obtain attention from other people.

Research on how to treat autism is a continuous process. It also makes it difficult because each child reacts differently to the various treatments.

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There is no cure, and probably never will be because of autism being a brain-based disorder. It has not yet been discovered how to restore the brain back to normality. All they can do now is find ways to relieve the symptoms and to help the child and its family cope better. Sometimes the symptoms do lessen as the child ages, and can do so to the point that the average person would not be able to tell the person is autistic. This is rare though, and most show some signs of autism throughout their life. There are many different treatments that people try: Diet intervention, medications, auditory training, behavior modification, educational programs, music therapy, occupational therapy, sensory and/or vision therapy and vitamin therapy to name a few. The treatments have a better chance of working the earlier you start your child on them. It has been proven that it could be crucial to their language and social skills. It is also extremely important for the parent to research the different types of treatments and decide which is best for their child.

One type of treatment is diet intervention. This proves to help drastically because autistic individuals are more apt to have allergies and food sensitivities. A believed reason for this is their impaired immune system. The most common food allergies tend to come from grains and dairy products. Also strawberries and citrus fruits. Consuming these foods could lead to headaches, nausea, stomachaches, bedwetting, stuttering, whining and crying, insomnia, hyperactivity, aggression, ear infections, and possibly a seizure. A way to test if a child is having a reaction to a type of food is to remove the item from their diet for a week or two, then feed it to them on an empty stomach. If there is a reaction, it will take place in 15-60 minutes. Another way to test it would be to give them the food every so many days. If

they have a reaction on those days, then there is an allergy to the item. The reason for the bad reaction to grains and dairy is because of the gluten found in wheat, oats, rye, and barley and the casein found in milk and other dairy products. Most autistic people have a damaged intestine. It may be damaged at birth, but more likely is from an immunological injury, like a bad reaction to an immunization. This is called a leaky gut. Because of this, not all the food proteins are completely digested, particularly the gluten and casein. These partially broken down proteins form peptides that act like opium. Like the drug, the peptides harm the brain, which causes or magnifies the autistic symptoms. Many times, parents who do not know of the opium affect don't want to take their child off of dairy and grain-based foods because that is all their children eat and they do not want them to starve. They do not realize that these foods are actually addicting to them and they will have to go through withdrawal and will then learn to eat other foods. To test the level of peptides, a urinary test can be done. Since gluten and casein cause such bad reactions, many autistic people are on Gluten-Free, Casein-Free diets. Gluten is not only in food, it is also in some medications, so it is very important that the pharmacist makes sure all over-the-counter and prescribed drugs do not contain it.

Another type of treatment is the use of megavitamins as nutritional supplements. There has been a drastic behavioral change from large doses of Vitamin B6 and magnesium. They must be used together though because magnesium helps the body to use B6 effectively. In some cases, these vitamins have helped to normalize brain waves and metabolism. Other supplements that have helped reduce symptoms are Vitamin C, which reduces rocking, spinning, and hand flapping, Dimethylglycine (DMG), a

nontoxic chemical, which has aided eye contact and speech, and reduced hyperactivity. These all lead to an overall better emotional health.

The other popular form of treatment is medications. There are medications for all different aspects of the disease. The most prescribed medication is Ritalin. Ritalin is a stimulant and is used to control or reduce hyperactivity and attention deficit. A newer antidepressant that has come into use is Zoloft, which helps to stop racing thoughts, obsessions, and reduces anxiety. Using a more natural, alternative medication, some people have started using secretin. This hormone that naturally aids in gastric functions is either injected or given in pill form. Most parents are extremely thrilled with the results and report behavioral and social improvements, willingness to use language, increase in affection level and attention span, and a better understanding of meanings. But, there have been a minute number of seizures while the child was being given the injection or shortly afterward. Enzyme Potentiated Desensitization (EPD) is a method of immunotherapy that is still being looked at by the FDA, but has been found to treat many immune and auto immune disorders and cuts down on the affects of allergies. There have been some problems with this though and it is questionable whether or not it will become widely used.

As the research shows, there are numerous ways to find treatments for autism. It is also important to keep up with the medical research because they seem to be finding and approving new treatments quite often. The most important part is finding out what is best for the individual and going from there.

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