

Autism Overview

Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder. While autism was once considered to be a rare disorder, currently the incidence of autism is estimated to be 1 in 1,000 people. If the other types of Pervasive Developmental Disorders (used interchangeably with Autism Spectrum Disorders) are included then the incidence is thought to be 1 in 200. Autism is now recognized as the most common developmental disorder in children.

In 1943 Dr. Leo Kanner described several children who displayed similar symptoms, that he called "autistic". There are several theories, but no conclusive answers about the cause, or causes, of autism. The one thing we are sure of is that poor parenting does NOT cause autism. Medical research regarding causation is currently focused on genetics, neurological differences, immunology and early identification.

Autism is a neurological disorder that affects communication, social interaction skills and behaviour. The symptoms usually become evident before a child's third birthday and this disorder occurs about four times more frequently in males than in females. As many as 50 percent of people with autism require a non-verbal augmentative system, such as picture symbols to help them communicate. The majority of people with autism have significant learning problems, with only a few demonstrating the fantastic mathematical and artistic abilities exhibited by Dustin Hoffman's character in the film "Rainman".

A diagnosis of autism requires impairments in all of the following areas of development: *

- A) **Social Interaction:** People with autism often do not relate well to other people (particularly peers), have difficulty learning to play with others, can not effectively use non-verbal behaviours such as eye-to-eye gaze and facial expressions while interacting and have difficulty sharing information and experiences with others.
- B) **Communication:** The impairment includes both spoken language and non-verbal skills (gestures, body postures, imaginative play). People with autism who speak may have difficulty with speech production and/or conversational skills.
- C) **Restricted Repertoire of Behaviours, Activities and Interests:** This includes some of the unusual behaviours that are often associated with autism such as: stereotyped body movements (hand flapping, toe walking, rocking, etc.), insistence upon following non-functional routines or rituals, preoccupations with parts of objects (wheels, handles, etc.), and an abnormally intense or focused preoccupation with a very limited range of interests.

A number of other features are associated with the disorder and may or may not be present. These may include difficulties in eating, sleeping and toileting, unusual fears, lack of awareness of danger, repetitive behaviours and speech, self-injury. Unusual responses to sensory input such as extreme reactions to loud noises or touch are commonly seen. Individuals with autism may have any or all of these associated features in various combinations.

There is no known cure for autism but structured early intervention combined with appropriate education programs can provide children with autism with the skills necessary for successful integration. Support and information for families, professionals and caregivers is also essential. With appropriate programs and support, individuals with autism can become active and contributing members of their communities.

If you would like further information about autism contact The Geneva Centre for Autism at www.autism.net or 416-322-7877 or 1-866-GENEVA9.

* Reference: American Psychiatric Association. Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder, 4th Edition, 1994.

DSM IV lists Autistic Disorder as one of five subtypes of Pervasive Developmental Disorders. There are 12 possible diagnostic characteristics, grouped in three categories: Social Interaction; Communication; Behaviour, Activities and Interests. At least 6 of the 12 characteristics must be present to receive a diagnosis of Autistic Disorder.
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