Autism

Autism is a developmental disorder of the brain. Autism is sometimes called Autism Spectrum Disorder. This means that the symptoms can occur in any combination and they may vary in severity. It is a lifelong problem. Children with autism often seem to be in their own world. They have little interest in interacting or considering others. They often have obsessions with one subject or item. They may spend long periods of time focused on one thing.

CAUSES

Autism may be due to genetic and environmental factors. The problem may be in:

- The brain's structure.
- The way the brain functions.
- The brain's structure *and* the way it functions.

In some cases, autism may run in families. Having one child with autism increases the risk of having a second child with autism. The risk is increased by about five percent.

SYMPTOMS

There can be many different symptoms of autism, but the most common are:

- Lack of responsiveness to other people.
  - Appearing deaf even though their hearing is fine.
  - Difficulty relating to other people's feelings.
- Obsessive interest in an object or a part of a toy.
- Little or no eye contact.
- Repetitive behaviors, such as rocking or hand flapping.
- Self abusive behavior, like head banging or scratching the skin.
- Unusual speech patterns, such as a sing-song voice.
- Speech that is absent or delayed.
- Constant discussion of one subject.
- Poor social skills, inappropriate or eccentric behavior. Conversation is difficult.
- Delayed motor (movement) skills like walking, pedaling a bike, etc.
- Delayed language skills.
- Reduced pain sensitivity.
- Overly sensitive to sound or touch or other sensations.
- Dislike of being touched or hugged.

Symptoms range from mild to severe. Symptoms in many children improve with treatment or with age. Some people with autism eventually lead normal or near-normal lives. Adolescence can worsen behavior problems in some children. Teenagers with autism may become depressed. Some children develop convulsions (*seizures*). People with autism have a normal life span.

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of autism is often a two stage process. The first stage may occur during a check up. Caregivers look for several signs, in addition to the symptoms mentioned above. These signs may be:

- Problems making friends.
- Little or no imaginative or social play.
- Repetitive or unusual use of language.
- Resistance to change.
- Laughing or crying for no apparent reason.
- Severe tantrums.
- Preference to being alone.
- A lack of interest in peers or others in the same room.

- Difficulty starting or maintaining conversations.

The second stage may include testing by of a team of specialists in autism.

TREATMENT

There is no single best treatment for autism. There is no cure, but research is being done. The most effective programs combine early and intensive treatments that are specific to the child. Treatment should be ongoing and re-evaluated regularly. It is usually a combination of:

- Teaching children to interact better with others, especially other children.
- Behavioral therapy - for behavioral or emotional problems. This can also help to cut back on obsessive interests and repetitive routines.
- Medicine - no current medicine exists for the treatment of autism. Medicines may be used to treat depression and anxiety. These problems can develop with autism. Medicine may also be used for behavior or hyperactivity problems. Seizures can be treated with medicine.
- Helping children with poor coordination and other issues.
- Helping children with their speech or conversations.
- Creating plans for the best educational opportunities for the child.
- Helping children with their over-sensitivity to touch and other sensation.
- Teaching parents how to manage behavior issues.
- Helping children's families deal with the stresses of having a child with autism.

With treatment, most children with autism and their families learn to cope with the symptoms of the problem. Social and personal relationships can continue to be challenging. Many adults with autism have normal jobs. They may struggle to live on their own without ongoing family or group support.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Home treatments are usually directed by the healthcare provider or the team of providers treating the child.
- Parents need support to help deal with children with autism. It helps to lean on family and friends. Support groups can often be found for families of autism.
- Children with autism often need help with social skills. Parents may need to teach things like how to:
  - Use eye contact.
  - Respect other peoples' personal spaces.
- Parents can model how to identify and be empathic with others emotions.
- Physical activities are often helpful with clumsiness and poor coordination.
- Children with autism respond well to routines for doing everyday things. Doing things like cooking, eating or cleaning at the same time each day often works best.
- Parents, teachers and school counselors should meet regularly to make sure that they are taking the same approach with the child. Meeting often helps to watch for problems and progress at school.
- When older children and teenagers with autism realize they are different, they may become sad or upset. Support from parents helps. Counseling may be needed. If other issues like depression or anxiety develop, medicine may be needed.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- Your child has new symptoms that worry you.
- Your child has reactions to medicines prescribed.
- Your child has convulsions. Look for:

- Jerking and twitching.
- Sudden falls for no reason.
- Lack of response.
- Dazed behavior for brief periods.
- Staring.
- Rapid blinking.
- Unusual sleepiness.
- Irritability when waking.

- Your older child is depressed. Watch for unusual sadness, decreased appetite, weight loss, lack of interest in things that are normally enjoyed, or poor sleep.
- Your older child shows signs of anxiety. Watch for excessive worry, restlessness, irritability, trembling, or difficulty with sleep.

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