

Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong developmental condition. It is also called Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). It takes in a wide range of different levels of ability and includes what was previously called Asperger's syndrome.

A person with autism has problems with:

- communication (talking, understanding instructions and body language, making eye contact)
- repetitive behaviour (hand flapping, repeating words, playing with the same toys)
- sensory issues (avoiding certain textures, sounds or lights, or seeking them out)

About 1 in 100 Australians and New Zealanders are living with autism. It's about four times more common in boys than in girls.

There is a huge variation in the way that autism affects a person's life, from social and relationship issues to daily activities, school and work.

What causes autism?

The causes of autism are unknown. Current research suggests that genes and the way the brain develops play a part.

There is nothing a parent does that can cause autism. Vaccinations do not cause autism.

Signs and symptoms of autism

Symptoms usually appear in early childhood.

In a child you might notice:

- a lack of interest in other children
- not saying any words by age 2
- not making eye contact with you
- not showing you things they find, not pointing or waving goodbye
- repetitive play
- intense, narrow interests (spinning wheels of toys, opening and closing doors)

- seeking out sensations (licking toys or playground equipment, for example)
- avoiding sensations (tantrums in bright, noisy places)
- tantrums or discomfort when a routine changes
- hand flapping, walking on tip-toe or rocking back and forth.

If you are concerned about your child, talk to your GP (family doctor) or paediatrician.

In an adult you might notice:

- difficulty joining conversations
- knowing what to say in social situations
- effort or anxiety in working out what others mean when they are talking
- trouble making friends
- trouble forming or keeping relationships
- intense interest in particular subjects
- anxiety or depression.

If you have symptoms that are affecting your daily life, it's important to seek help.

Getting help

As a first step, see your GP.

A GP can assess your symptoms and write you a referral to a psychiatrist, paediatrician or multidisciplinary team.

Childcare workers, teachers and community health workers may also be able to help you. Some can also make referrals.

➤ First steps to get help
yourhealthinmind.org/first

How is autism diagnosed?

In Australia, autism is diagnosed by a multidisciplinary team, child psychiatrist or paediatrician.

In New Zealand, autism is usually diagnosed by a paediatrician or Child, Adolescent & Family Mental Health Service.

Multidisciplinary team

A team of health professionals involved in autism diagnosis may include:

- paediatrician
- child psychiatrist
- clinical psychologist
- speech therapist
- occupational therapist.

Assessments

Assessment for autism can involve three or four appointments over a few weeks. Your child's cognition (thinking skills), communication, physical health, home life and school or kindergarten will be carefully reviewed.

Diagnosis in adults

Generally adults are diagnosed through discussion and assessment with either a psychiatrist or clinical psychologist.

Why get a diagnosis?

In children, a diagnosis will:

- allow you to get help with their speech, learning and socialising
- open up a range of government and community services to help you and your child
- allow your child's school to receive government funding
- help you to understand and learn about your child's behaviour.

For adults a diagnosis may be useful for:

- getting a better understanding of any difficulties you have
- learning useful ways to cope
- finding a community of people who are going through the same thing
- getting proper treatment for any mental health issues.

People with autism can also have intellectual disability, fragile X syndrome, ADHD, or gastrointestinal issues.

In adulthood, mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder can be common.

How is autism treated?

Autism can't be cured. But there are ways to make life easier for someone with autism and their family.

Language skills, socialising and the ability to perform daily tasks can be improved in all children with autism.

Early intervention programs

Early intervention programs help children with speech, learning daily tasks and playing with others.

Around 30 hours per week of specialist therapy is recommended.

This could be with:

- a therapist at a specialist centre your child visits daily
- a therapist who comes to your home
- a support worker at a regular kindergarten or school.

Intervention programs work best when they are started as early as possible (ideally before preschool age).

Medication

In rare cases, a psychiatrist might prescribe medication to help with extreme self-harm or aggression.

Medication may also be recommended for depression or anxiety.

What can a psychiatrist do for autism?

Psychiatrists can:

- make a diagnosis of autism alongside a team of other health professionals
- diagnose and treat ADHD, depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder
- prescribe medication if required
- provide referrals to speech therapists, neurologists, paediatricians, occupational therapists and psychologists
- connect you to community services
- provide medical reports for other doctors, schools or workplaces.

👉 Find a psychiatrist near you who specialises in diagnosing autism.

yourhealthinmind.org/find

Support for people with autism

Help with daily activities

People with autism may benefit from:

- learning about autism and teaching others about their diagnosis
- having clear rules for social interactions (if someone says 'hello' say 'hello' back)
- visual aids (e.g. a drawing of what they should do)
- a familiar environment

- reducing sensory overload
- good daily routines
- lots of socialising and play
- opportunities to develop things they are good at
- support for parents, siblings, grandparents, spouses and children.

Socialising

There are play and parenting groups for the families and whānau of children with autism.

Australia

- ✦ **PlayConnect** playgroups for children with autism.
- ✦ **Amaze** information, support groups and advice.
- ✦ **Autism Spectrum Australia** school programs, parent and carer support.

New Zealand

- ✦ **Parent2Parent NZ** support for parents.
- ✦ **Altogether Autism** personalised information about autism.

Other therapies

You may come across many products, services and therapies that claim to help autism.

Not all therapies have evidence to show that they benefit the person with autism. Some are expensive.

- ✦ The Raising Children Network explains many of these therapies in detail.
raisingchildren.net.au

Helping yourself

- Identify what you're good at, and build on your skills.
- Learn new coping strategies and use them when you feel overwhelmed.
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Try to socialise whenever you can.

- Get regular check-ups of your physical and mental health.
- Join a support group in-person or online.
- Be aware of the signs of anxiety and depression.

Helping someone with autism

- Take care of your own needs first.
- Learn about autism and the best ways to help the person you are looking after.
- Encourage socialising as much as you can.
- Make appointments for regular check-ups of physical and mental health.
- Talk to other parents and families about their experiences.
- Be aware of your rights to funding, support and advocacy.
- Take time out if you need it.

- ✦ Caring for someone
yourhealthinmind.org/caring

More information

- ✦ Raising Children Network
raisingchildren.net.au
- ✦ Autism NZ
www.autismnz.org.nz
- ✦ Autism Awareness
www.autismawareness.com.au

Funding and support options for children with autism

- ✦ **Australia**
- ✦ **New Zealand**

Remember

- ✓ Autism is a lifelong condition with a great variation in a person's skills and abilities.
- ✓ All children with autism can benefit from early help with speech and socialising.
- ✓ Diagnosis can be beneficial for all age groups.
- ✓ Psychiatrists can diagnose autism and any related mental health conditions.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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