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What does it mean to be on the autism spectrum?

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Autism is more than a single disorder

Autism rates have risen since researchers first started tracking the disorder back in 2000. Today, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in 68 children has autism, or one in every 42 boys and one in every 189 girls.

But while the number of diagnoses is increasing, it doesn't necessarily mean that autism is on the rise. Many researchers believe this increase comes primarily from an improvement in our ability to recognize the condition.

“Every individual with autism is unique, and symptoms can range from mild to severe,” said Christa Martin, PhD, director of Geisinger’s [Autism & Developmental Medicine Institute](#) (ADMI). “This is what we mean when we refer to the ‘autism spectrum.’ Because of this, it’s important that everyone with autism receives individualized treatment and attention.”

Getting to know the autism spectrum

Autism is a type of neurological disorder that affects the ability to communicate and socialize. It is associated with repetitive behaviors and highly focused interests. In severe instances, autism can prevent people from learning to speak at all.

“People with autism share certain traits, but at different degrees,” said Dr. Martin. “We diagnose individuals with autism spectrum disorder so that we can offer the best treatment. Those who are ‘high-functioning,’ with milder symptoms, can often maintain a greater degree of independence.

Some individuals with autism have more severe symptoms and need more help with daily tasks.”

Higher-functioning individuals with autism may develop certain areas of intense interest, and become quite knowledgeable about these topics. These areas of interest can sometimes be built upon to create vocational opportunities in adulthood.

Types of autism

Today, all autism diagnoses are viewed within the single diagnostic category of “autism spectrum disorder.” However, several other names have been used over the years to describe these types of social and communication differences. While these diagnoses are no longer widely used in clinical practice, some people still use them to describe types of autism spectrum disorder.

“Autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder, and Asperger syndrome are diagnoses previously used to describe varying degrees of symptoms within the autism spectrum,” said Thomas Challman, MD, medical director and neurodevelopmental pediatrician at ADAMI. “Individuals given diagnoses of Asperger syndrome generally had better language and cognitive skills, but exhibited difficulty with social communication as well as patterns of repetitive behavior and intense interests.”

People diagnosed with pervasive developmental disorder or autistic disorder typically had more severe symptoms. These terms have largely been put aside in favor of the single diagnostic category of “autism spectrum disorder.”

Symptoms of autism

Symptoms of autism are commonly first noted at or before the age of 2. Evidence suggests that treating autism early can lead to improved language skills, social abilities and quality of life.

Here are some signs to look for if you think your child might have autism.

- Making little to no eye contact
- Delays in or lack of spoken language
- Repetitive use of language, unusual movements or repetitive behavior with objects (lining, sorting, etc.)
- Lack of interest in making friends or in interacting socially with family
- Unusual fixation on specific objects or topics

Causes of autism

Many genetic and non-genetic factors have been identified as contributing to the development of autism. These factors are thought to cause changes in the brain very early in development, before a baby is even born.

“There are now hundreds of different genetic changes that have been shown to cause autism,” said Martin. “These genetic differences may be a new change that occurs spontaneously at the time of conception, or might be inherited from a parent. Researchers are only beginning to understand how changes in genes affect brain function and lead to the symptoms of autism.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that all children with autism undergo certain genetic tests to try to identify these causes.

Several other factors also appear to be risk factors for the development of autism, including extreme prematurity, certain maternal infections during the pregnancy, and advanced parental age. One factor that the scientific community feels very strongly is not associated with autism is vaccines – multiple well-designed studies have not shown any evidence connecting the onset of autism with the administration of immunizations.

If you think your child might have autism, a good place to start is your child's primary care provider – they can help guide the next steps for further evaluation. Health care professionals including developmental pediatricians, psychologists and neurologists can diagnose autism and determine the best treatment plan.

At Geisinger, a multidisciplinary team at the Autism & Developmental Medicine Institute offers comprehensive diagnostic evaluations and genetic testing for autism and other developmental disorders. For more information, please visit <http://geisingeradmi.org>.