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What is Autism? An Overview

En Español

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. It is part of a group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Today, 1 in 150 individuals is diagnosed with autism, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls. Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It is also associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviors, such as obsessively arranging objects or following very specific routines. Symptoms can range from very mild to quite severe.

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Autism was first identified in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins Hospital. At the same time, a German scientist, Dr. Hans Asperger, described a milder form of the disorder that is now known as Asperger Syndrome ([read more](#)). These two disorders are listed in the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as two of the five developmental disorders that fall under the autism spectrum disorders. The others are Rett Syndrome, PDD NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. All of these disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviors. For more discussion on the range of diagnoses that comprise autism spectrum disorder, [click here](#).

Autism spectrum disorders can usually be reliably diagnosed by age 3, although new research is pushing back the age of diagnosis to as early as 6 months. Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child or their child's failure to reach appropriate developmental milestones. Some parents describe a child that seemed different from birth, while others describe a child who was developing normally and then lost skills. Pediatricians may initially dismiss signs of autism, thinking a child will "catch up," and may advise parents to "wait and see." New research shows that when parents suspect something is wrong with their child, they are usually correct. If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait: speak to your pediatrician about getting your child screened for autism.

If your child is diagnosed with autism, early intervention is critical to gain maximum benefit from existing therapies. Although parents may have concerns about labeling a toddler as "autistic," the earlier the diagnosis is made, the earlier interventions can begin. Currently, there are no effective means to prevent autism, no fully effective treatments, and no cure. Research indicates, however, that early intervention in an appropriate educational setting for at least two years during the preschool years can result in significant improvements for many young children with autism spectrum disorders. As soon as autism is diagnosed, early intervention instruction should begin. Effective programs focus on developing communication, social, and cognitive skills.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

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Autism Research Gets Stimulus Money for a Short-Term Boost

The National Institutes of Health is trying to kickstart autism research with \$60 million in grant funding from the stimulus bill. It is the largest-ever funding opportunity for research into the neuro-developmental disorder, says the NIMH, the NIH's mental-health arm.

The CDC estimates that autism now strikes 1 in 150 U.S. children, and the epidemic spurred the government to put out a research plan in January. President Obama himself has made autism a priority, promising to put \$1 billion in funds towards research. The NIMH grants support research on topics like early intervention and diagnostic testing.



All this urgency is because there are few options for autistic children beyond behavior and diet modifications. The only drug on the market for the condition — J&J's antipsychotic Risperdal — treats irritability associated with autism, but not the underlying disease. The HHS Interagency Coordinating Committee, which put out the January research plan, likened autism to Alzheimer's in terms of cost to society, running as high as \$90 billion a year.

But while Alzheimer's is a big push right now for drug makers, few if any novel medicines are being tested now by Big Pharma for autism. One industry-supported study, looking at Prozac, failed last month.

The grant money has to be allocated by fall 2010 — not enough time to fund any big clinical trials, NIMH Director Thomas Insel told the Health Blog. "This is a jobs bill about putting people back to work and the president wants that to happen yesterday," he says. "It's for recovery, not for long-term clinical trials, but things we do in the short term will help us in the long term."

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