

What Does Autism Mean?

Autism causes kids to experience the world differently from the way most other kids do. It's hard for kids with autism to talk with other people and express themselves using words. Kids who have autism usually keep to themselves and many can't communicate without special help.

They also may react to what's going on around them in unusual ways. Normal sounds may really bother someone with autism - so much so that the person covers his or her ears. Being touched, even in a gentle way, may feel uncomfortable.

Autistic kids often can't make connections that other kids make easily. For example, when someone smiles, you know the smiling person is happy or being friendly. But a kid with autism may have trouble connecting that smile with the person's happy feelings.

A kid who has autism also has trouble linking words with their meanings. Imagine trying to understand what your mom was saying if you didn't know what her words really meant. It is doubly frustrating then if a kid can't come up with the right words to express his or her own thoughts.

Autism causes kids to act in unusual ways. They might flap their hands, say certain words over and over, have temper tantrums, or play only with one particular toy. Most kids with autism don't like changes in routines. They like to stay on a schedule that is always the same. They also may insist that their toys, or other objects, are arranged a certain way and get upset if these items are moved or disturbed.

If someone has autism, his or her brain has trouble with an important job: making sense of the world. Every day, your brain interprets the sights, sounds, smells, and other sensations that you experience. If your brain couldn't help you understand these things, you would have trouble functioning, talking, going to school, and doing other everyday stuff. Kids can be mildly affected by autism, so that they only have a little trouble in life, or they can be very affected, so that they need a lot of help.

What Causes Autism?

Autism affects two to six out of every 1,000 kids, but no one knows what causes it. Some scientists think that some kids might be more likely to get autism because it or similar disorders run in their families. Knowing autism's exact cause is hard because the human brain is very complicated.

The [brain](#) contains over 100 billion nerve cells called **neurons**. Each neuron may have hundreds or thousands of connections to other nerve cells in the brain and body. The connections (which are made by releasing neurotransmitters) let different neurons in different areas of the brain - areas that help you see, feel, move, remember, and much more - work together.

For some reason, some of the cells and connections in an autistic kid's brain - especially those that affect communication, emotions, and senses - don't develop properly or get damaged. Scientists are still trying to understand how and why this happens.

What Do Doctors Do?

Figuring out if a kid has autism can be difficult. A parent is usually the first to suspect that something is wrong. Maybe the kid is old enough to speak but doesn't, doesn't seem interested in people, or behaves in other unusual ways. But autism isn't the only problem that can cause these kinds of symptoms. For example, kids who have hearing problems may have trouble speaking, too.

Usually, lab tests and other medical tests are normal in kids with autism, but doctors may do them to make sure the kid doesn't have other problems. These medical tests may include blood and urine tests, a hearing exam, an EEG (a test to measure brain waves), and an MRI (a picture that shows the structure of the brain). Intelligence (IQ) tests also may be done.

Often, specialists work together as a team to figure out what is wrong. The team might include a pediatrician, a pediatric neurologist, a pediatric developmentalist, a child psychiatrist, a child psychologist, speech and language therapists, and others. The team members study how the child plays, learns, communicates, and behaves. The team listens carefully to what parents have noticed, too. Using the information they've gathered, doctors can decide whether a child has autism or another problem.

How Is Autism Treated?

There is no cure for autism, but doctors, therapists, and special teachers can help kids with autism overcome or adjust to many difficulties. The earlier a kid starts treatment for autism, the better.

Different kids need different kinds of help, but learning how to communicate is always an important first step. Spoken language can be hard for kids with autism to learn. Most understand words better by seeing them, so therapists teach them how to communicate by pointing or using pictures or sign language. That makes learning other things easier, and eventually, many kids with autism learn to talk.

Therapists also help kids learn social skills, such as how to greet people, wait for a turn, and follow directions. Some kids need special help with living skills (like brushing teeth or making a bed). Others have trouble sitting still or controlling their tempers and need therapy to help them control their behavior. Some kids take medications to help their moods and behavior, but there's no medicine for autism.

Students with mild autism sometimes can go to regular school. But most kids with autism need calmer, more orderly surroundings. They also need teachers trained to understand the problems they have with communicating and learning. They may learn at home or in special classes at public or private schools.

Living With Autism

Some kids with mild autism will grow up and be able to live on their own. Those with more serious problems will always need some kind of help. But all kids with autism have brighter futures when they have the support and understanding of doctors, teachers, caregivers, parents, brothers, sisters, and friends.

Taken from Kid'sHealth.org