

Information About Autism

What is autism?

Autism is a neurodevelopmental condition, which means that it affects how the brain develops. As such, it is a lifelong condition. Autistic individuals experience difficulties communicating and interacting effectively with others. They may also have unusual or intense interests, sensory issues, repetitive speech or movements and/or struggle to manage changes in their routines. Difficulties exist across a range of abilities and levels of severity, that is why it is known as a 'spectrum' condition. Differences are present from early childhood and can negatively impact on social, educational and/or occupational functioning.

Approximately two in 100 people are on the autistic spectrum. The current male to female ratio is approximately 3:1.

Causes?

Genetics is the main contributing factor in the development of autism. Parents who have a neurodevelopmental condition, such as autism, intellectual disability or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are more likely to have a child with autism. Currently, it is not known exactly which genes are involved.

Some environmental factors can also increase the likelihood of a child being born with autism. For example, parental age, maternal prenatal medication use and maternal physical and mental health.

What does autism look like?

Due to the range of possible differences, autistic individuals can present very differently from one another. Some may have intellectual disability and some may have very high IQs. Some may need a lot of help with daily tasks and others may not. Many autistic individuals have a 'spikey' set of strengths and differences.

What other conditions co-occur?

Most autistic individuals have at least one other co-occurring condition. They may have another neurodevelopmental condition, such as intellectual disability and/or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Mental health conditions, such as anxiety and low mood, frequently co-occur with autism as a result of shared genetic and biological features, but also as a result of challenges that autistic individuals experience during their life. For example, academic underachievement or difficulties developing or keeping friends.

Autistic individuals may also experience extreme emotions and can become overwhelmed. For young people, this can include 'tantrums' when they don't get what they want, or 'meltdowns' when they feel overwhelmed.

What support is available (if required)?

There is no medication for the core features of autism. However, there are a number of psychosocial interventions available for autistic individuals if they want or need them.

- **Psychoeducation:** Understanding an autistic individual's specific strengths and differences and understanding autism more generally, can be helpful. A thorough assessment should provide lots of useful information about the individual's strengths and differences. There are lots of free resources online (e.g., National Autistic Society; www.autism.org.uk). Psychoeducation can also be completed face to face or remotely with a healthcare professional who has experience working with families living with autism.
- **Emotional Literacy and Emotional Regulation:** It can be helpful for an autistic individual to develop an emotional language to support them in understanding and communicating their emotional experiences (Emotional Literacy). Following this, Emotional Regulation work could help autistic individuals manage their unwanted or unhelpful emotional experiences. This work should be completed by a professional who has experience working with autism.

- **Social Skills:** Some autistic people may have difficulties developing and maintaining friendships as a result of the core features of autism and associated conditions. There are specific standardised social skills programs available, such as the PEERS programs tailored for different ages and delivered by healthcare professionals. Social skills can also be taught at home or at school during appropriate teaching moments. Practicing social skills with adults before using them with peers can also be helpful.
- **Positive Behaviour Change:** Meeting support needs may involve working with families to develop effective strategies and reward systems. These should be developed in collaboration with an experienced professional to meet the specific needs of the individual and their family as part of a person-centred and neurodiversity affirming approach.
- **Speech and Language:** Autistic individuals that require additional speech and language assessment or support, should complete this work with a qualified Speech and Language therapist who has experience working with autistic individuals.
- **Occupational Therapy:** Some autistic individuals may need further assessment or intervention for sensory or motor differences. This work should be completed by Occupational Therapists who specialise in autism.
- **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT):** CBT is effective for managing co-occurring mental health difficulties, such as anxiety and/or depression. It is also effective in managing behavioural difficulties, such as aggression. CBT can be adjusted to accommodate the individual's age and level of ability. CBT should be completed by a professional qualified in CBT and experienced working with autistic individuals.