

MENTAL HEALTH

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS



TUFTS  Health Plan
momentum

WHAT ARE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS?

Autism spectrum disorders include autism, pervasive developmental disorder, and Asperger's syndrome. Autism spectrum disorders are brain disorders in which a child shows varying degrees of deficiency in social interactions, verbal and non-verbal communication, and repetitive behaviors. The causes of autism spectrum disorders are unknown, but research is being done to understand more about these complicated, lifelong disorders.

Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorders

There is no medical test that can detect and diagnose autism. The diagnosis is made through observation of a child's communication, behavior, and developmental milestones by a multidisciplinary team of professionals.

Medical tests may be useful to rule out other possible explanations for the child's symptoms. A diagnosis can usually be made by age 3. In some children, the symptom picture may indicate a need for intervention as early as age 2.

INDICATORS OF POSSIBLE AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS INCLUDE:

- ▶ The child does not babble, point, or make meaningful gestures by the time he or she is 1 year old.
- ▶ He or she does not speak one word by 16 months of age.
- ▶ The child does not combine two words by age 2.
- ▶ A child does not respond to his or her name by age 1.
- ▶ There is a loss of language or social skills.
- ▶ The child makes poor eye contact.
- ▶ He or she does not smile.
- ▶ A child does not seem to know how to play with toys.
- ▶ He or she lines up toys or other objects excessively.
- ▶ At times, the child seems to be hearing-impaired.

If you have concerns about these or any other behaviors, please discuss them with your child's pediatrician.

Treatment of Autism Spectrum Disorders

There is no cure for autism spectrum disorders, but early diagnosis and early intervention are key in achieving greater positive results.

There is no single best treatment for all children with autism spectrum disorders, however most individuals respond well to highly structured, specialized educational programs. It is important to gather as much information as possible about the many educational treatment programs available and to make a decision based on your child's needs.

The National Institute of Mental Health suggests that “an effective treatment program will build on the child’s interests, offer a predictable schedule, teach tasks as a series of simple steps, actively engage the child’s attention in highly structured activities, and provide regular reinforcement of behavior. Parental involvement has emerged as a major factor in treatment success. Parents work with teachers and therapists to identify the behaviors to be changed and the skills to be taught.”

After your child has been diagnosed, it may be helpful to keep a notebook or log of all the information you gather.

Below is a partial list of questions developed by the National Institute of Mental Health that may help you make a decision regarding the best treatment program for your child:

- ▶ Do staff members at the treatment program have training and experience in working with children and adolescents with autism?
- ▶ How successful has the program been for other children?
- ▶ How is the progress of each child measured?
- ▶ Will my child’s behavior be closely observed and recorded?
- ▶ Will the program prepare me to continue the therapy at home?

Medication may be prescribed when self-injurious behaviors or other behavioral symptoms are present. Family members may also find it helpful to seek outpatient counseling services to assist in coping with an autistic child. Early intervention programs are available for children younger than age 3. Your child’s pediatrician can refer you to a program.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Parenting a child with autism can be challenging. It is essential for you as a parent to understand the diagnosis in order to assist your child in coping with his or her autism. It is also important that you make time to care for yourself.

Here are some resources that are available if you feel that you need some help.

Parental Supports/Resources

Parent's Resource Network Line

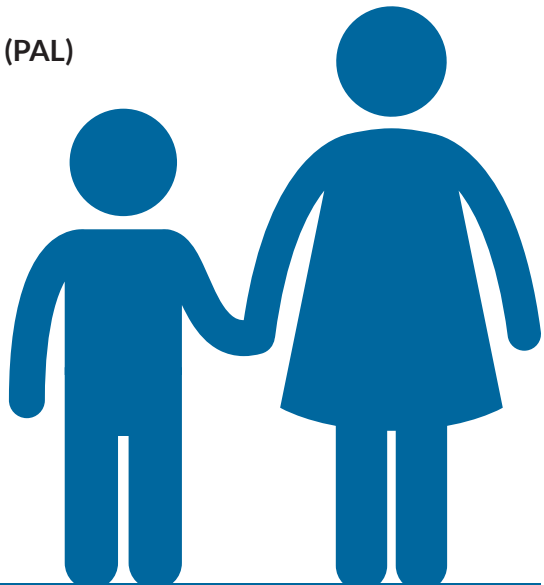
[1-866-815-8122](tel:1-866-815-8122)

Using this toll-free number, created by the Parent/Professional Advocacy League, you can obtain support and get information on mental health services for children.

Parent Advocacy League (PAL)

ppal.net

PAL provides support, education, and advocacy around issues related to children's mental health.



Link to Asperger Community Support Groups in Massachusetts
udel.edu/bkirby/asperger

From this Web site's homepage, click on Support Groups on the left-hand side, and then on Local Support Groups & Resources for a list of support groups in your area.

Educational Supports/Resources

Massachusetts Department of Education
doe.mass.edu/sped/links/Autism.htm

If your child's symptoms are interfering with his or her academic performance, Massachusetts' 766 law enables you to make a request for an evaluation by your child's school system. For further information, contact your local school system.

Massachusetts Advocates for Children
Autism Special Education Legal Support Center
1-617-357-8431, extension 234 | massadvocates.org

Additional Resources

National Institute of Mental Health
nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/autism-spectrumdisorders-pervasive-developmental-disorders/index.shtml

The National Institute of Mental Health Web site on autism provides a detailed booklet that describes autism and information on coping with the diagnosis. The information is available to download.

Autism Society
1-800-3-AUTISM or 1-781- 237-0272 (Massachusetts chapter)
autism-society.org

The Autism Society of America is the leading voice and resource of the autism community in education, advocacy, services, research, and support.

Autism Resources

autism-resources.com

This Web site offers information and links regarding the developmental disabilities of autism and Asperger's syndrome.

Autism Link

autismlink.com

The site seeks to help parents of autistic children by providing opportunities for support, inclusion, and information free of charge.

Child Development Institute

childdevelopmentinfo.com/disorders/autism_fact_sheet.shtml

Fact sheets and various information and resources on autism are available.

Source: National Institute of Mental Health;
United States Department of Education



If you need assistance locating a Tufts Health Plan participating provider for additional support, please contact the Tufts Health Plan Mental Health Department at 1-800-208-9565 Monday through Thursday from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Mental Health Department

1-800-208-9565

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