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What is autism?

Autism, part of a group of disorders known as Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), is a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. The disorder is characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviors. Symptoms range from mild to severe. One milder form of the disorder is known as Asperger Syndrome. Other developmental disorders that fall under the Autism Spectrum Disorders are Rett Syndrome, PDD NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. 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. If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait: speak to your pediatrician about getting your child screened for autism.

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What does it mean to be "on the spectrum"?

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means it manifests itself in many different forms. A diagnosis can range from mild to severe, and though children who have it (i.e. are on the spectrum) are likely to exhibit similar traits, they're also as individual as the colors of a rainbow, each one managing a grab bag of symptoms. While one child may rarely speak and have difficulty learning how to read and write, another can be so high-functioning he's able to attend classes in a mainstream school. Yet another child may be so sensitive to the feel of fabric that all tags must be cut off before he wears a piece of clothing, while his friend who's also autistic may not have any sensory issues at all.

How common is autism?

According to the Centers for Disease Control, autism affects as many as 1 in every 150 children in the United States. Therefore, it is estimated that 1.5 million Americans may be affected with autism. Also, government statistics suggest the rate of autism is rising 10-17 percent annually. Unfortunately, the numbers appear to be continuing their upward climb. In fact, it is the most prevalent developmental disorder to date; according to the Centers for Disease Control, of the approximately 4 million babies born every year, 24,000 of them will eventually be identified as autistic. Also, recent studies suggest boys are more susceptible than girls to developing autism. In the United States alone, 1 out of 94 boys are suspected of being on the spectrum, with perhaps more going undiagnosed to this day. That said, girls appear to manifest a more severe form of the disorder than their male counterparts.

How did my child develop autism?

No one knows for sure. Though it's understandable to expect that a disorder as common as autism would have a known cause, in many ways it's still quite mysterious. Recent studies suggest a strong genetic basis for autism – up to 20 sets of genes may play a part in its development. Genetics alone, however, can't account for all the cases, and so scientists are also looking into possible environmental origins, as well as other triggers.

Are vaccines to blame?

Though the debate over the role that vaccines play in causing autism grows more heated every day, researchers have still not found a definitive link between the two. According to organizations such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization, there's just not enough evidence to support the contention that vaccines – specifically thimerosal-containing vaccines – cause children to develop autism. One study published in the medical journal *Lancet* faulting the measles-mumps-rubella (MMR) shot has since been questioned by its own authors, and many others have also failed to pass scientific muster. Still, the accusations continue, largely from parents of children on the spectrum, and it's easy to understand why: There are still no answers to this day about what's causing a disorder that appears to steadily be expanding its reach.

Is there a cure for autism?

Unfortunately, experts have been unable thus far to come up with a cure for autism. Many treatments and therapies have surfaced since the disorder has grown more visible in the mainstream press, but reputable doctors have yet to agree on any that will reverse the diagnosis. But there's hope: Scientists are hard at work every day finding a solution for this growing problem. While advocacy groups have said for years that lack of funding for research is to blame for the dearth of definitive answers, a bill known as the Combating Autism Act, which would funnel millions of dollars to developing a cure, was passed through Congress and signed by the President ensuring that \$162 million has been appropriated to fund autism research, services and treatment. Until such cure is discovered, parents have been relying on early intervention programs such as applied behavior analysis, or ABA, and play therapy to mitigate the behaviors associated with autism. For some, these treatments have proven to be very successful, helping kids on the spectrum lead a full and active life.

How can I tell if a child has autism?

No two children with autism are alike, but there are some signs that many of them share and that experts agree may be as recognizable as early as the toddler years, or even sooner. Children on the spectrum generally have difficulty relating to others; they may hardly speak, and if they do, they may not communicate in ways that other people can easily understand (they may screech loudly when they're upset, for example, instead of crying). They don't usually sustain eye contact – it's too intense – and have trouble reading social cues. They're also prone to repetitive behaviors, flapping their hands constantly or uttering the same phrase over and over again. They may also be more sensitive than typically developing children, or dramatically less so, to sights, sounds and touch.

What should I do if I suspect something is wrong with my child?

Don't wait—talk to your doctor about getting child screened for autism. New research shows that children as young as one may exhibit signs of autism, so recognizing early signs and knowing developmental milestones is important. Early intervention is key.

How do I get my child the help he needs?

You can start by making sure he has a reputable healthcare team by his side. That means finding doctors, therapists, psychologists and teachers who understand and have experience with autism and can respond to his shifting needs appropriately. Ask your child's pediatrician to recommend a developmental pediatrician with whom you can consult about the next step. She, in turn, can guide you toward various intervention programs and suggest complementary therapies. It also helps to plug into an already existing network of parents facing the same challenges as you.

How do I deal with this diagnosis?

First, be kind to yourself. It's not easy to recover from the shock of learning your child has a developmental disorder that has no known cause or cure. Accept any and all feelings the diagnosis may elicit, and try not to blame yourself: It would've been impossible for you to figure out a way to shield your child from autism completely. The next step is to arm yourself with all the facts about the disorder. Knowledge is power, and the more you know, the more capable you'll feel about navigating the daunting autism gauntlet. That said, it's also important to give yourself a "break" from autism when it becomes too overwhelming. And if you find that the diagnosis has been so crippling that you've been unable to get past it, consider talking to a counselor or therapist. You can't — and aren't expected to — weather this storm alone.

Will my child be able to attend school?

Most likely yes. Much depends on where your child falls on the spectrum, but with your support, as well as that of doctors, therapists and teachers, your child should be able to attend school. In fact, it's his right: According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990, which mentions autistic children specifically, your child deserves access to a "free and appropriate" education funded by the government, whether it be in a mainstream or special education classroom.

