

Your Health Reference Sheet

Topic: Autism

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Autism isn't a disease. It's a disorder, meaning it's characterized by a variety of developmental disabilities. These disabilities can range from a mild form of autism, such as pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), to the more severe form where there are profound language and social disabilities. Autism affects over 678,000 children in the United States and the numbers are increasing at an alarming rate. In fact, prior to 1990, two-thirds of the autistic children born, were born with onset autism, meaning it developed during pregnancy or shortly after birth, and only one-third with regression autism, meaning it developed between the ages of 12-24 months. Now the trend is reversing, where less than one-third are now autistic at birth and two-thirds are becoming autistic in their second year. And unlike before, where it was primarily considered a male child disorder, it's now becoming a female child disorder as more girls are being diagnosed daily.

General Description:

Autism is also referred to as a *mind-blind* condition. This is because of the brain's inability to connect the activities of the right hemisphere, which are visual and kinesthetic, with the activities of the left hemisphere, which are auditory and cognitive. This brain malfunction creates a barrier between the two hemispheres and between the child and the outside world as they're unable to relate to it or the people in it.

A child's brain develops from conception throughout the early years where it gradually collects information and creates its own perception of self. That is what forms a child's perceptual self-boundary. In the case of autism, rather than the self-boundary expanding throughout childhood to engage the child in their interactions with the world, the self-boundary shrinks, causing the child to form an altered world that provides, internally, all the self it needs to function and to survive. The word autism is from the Greek word *autos*, which means self.

Autism typically appears during the first three years of life. In the case of onset autism, a child will even show its symptoms from birth. In the case of regression autism, a child may seem to be developing normally at first, only to show the symptoms when they are 18 to 36 months old. Autism has no clear delineations of who will be affected by it. It knows no racial, ethnic, or social boundaries nor does family income, lifestyle, or educational levels determine a child's susceptibility.

Children with autism go through the same stages and challenges as children without it. However, it takes longer to get through them. They get stuck and overwhelmed with the situations of everyday life. So, it's important to be supportive of the child as they're going through the challenges of life and having their mental meltdowns. Yet, at the same time, it's important to direct their attention and focus to what is needed to help them move forward.

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