



AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Definition

Autism spectrum disorder is a neurobehavioural disorder which affects the way the brain functions. As a result, individuals with autism have difficulties with communication and social interaction, and unusual patterns of behaviour, activities and interests. Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means that each individual can be affected differently from mild to severe impairments.

Common Behaviours in Autism

While these are some common behaviours seen in children with autism, they can also be seen in developmentally normal children. It is the combination of behaviours that makes autism a possible diagnosis.

Language & Communication

No babbling by 11 months
No gestures by 12 months
No words by 18 months
Doesn't respond to name
Poor turn-taking in conversation
Echolalia or repetitive words/phrases
Odd gestures or body movements

Social Skills

No or poor eye contact
Preference for solitary play
No or limited shared interest/enjoyment
Delayed pretend or imaginative play
Lines up toys or interested in moving parts
Specific ways/rituals to perform activities
Tends to take things literally

Causes

Autism is a multifactorial disorder. This means there is no "one cause" for autism but rather there are various genetic and environmental factors that interact and contribute to autism. If your child is diagnosed with autism, your pediatrician will order some bloodwork to investigate for some medical and genetic causes.

Autism is not caused by MMR or any other immunizations. For more information on this topic, please visit:

www.immunize.ca/en/publications-resources/questions/autism.aspx

www.cdc.gov/vaccinesafety/Concerns/Autism/antigens.html

Diagnosis

Determining that a child has autism often requires input from a multidisciplinary team. Diagnosis is based on specific criteria set forth by the DSM-5, which is the Diagnosis and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders.

There are various ways that you can be diagnosed:

- Community Pediatrician, in certain situations with input from your child's current multidisciplinary team
- Child Developmental Services at the Child Developmental Centre
- Private assessment by a trained psychologist
- Some specialized preschools also offer private assessments

In 2013, DSM-5 updated the autism criteria, and removed the previously used terms of Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder (PDD). Now, all these diagnoses fall under the common terminology of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

No matter which route you choose, you are encouraged to attend the "After a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder" session at Child Developmental Services. Ask your pediatrician for more information.

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Treatment

Autism is a life-long condition for which there is no cure. However, with intensive early intervention, some individuals improve their language and social skills. This involves a multidisciplinary team that can include: speech language pathologist (SLP), occupational therapist (OT), physiotherapist (PT), behavioural therapist, psychologist and/or other trained professional. Treatment is often done as a combination of program-based and in-home supports. In Calgary, there are a variety of specialized preschool and schools. More information on this can be obtained from your local school board.

Alternative treatments for autism include things such as specific diets or supplements. These are not widely recommended in autism as most do not stand up to scientific standards. Many families will explore alternative treatments, and it is important to ensure that you are making an informed decision. More information on evidence-based alternative treatments is available on our website: “Navigating Information on Intervention” handout. The pediatricians at Infinity Pediatrics do not promote or endorse a specific alternate treatment for autism. But it is important to tell your child’s pediatrician if you have chosen to explore an alternative treatment.

Funding & Support

Preschool Unit Funding (PUF)

- A trained specialist, such as SLP, OT or PT submits a diagnostic report on the behalf of families to obtain funding for their service.
- The assessment usually needs to be done after March for program funding for the following September
- 3 years of funding available, generally starting age 2.5 to 3 years old and continues for first year of kindergarten

Family Support for Children with Disabilities (FSCD)

- Family needs to open file (see their handout)
- They do require a letter of diagnosis from a physician

Disability Tax Credit Certificate, T2201

- Form downloadable from CRA website www.cra-arc.gc.ca/disability
- Families fill in page 1, and a qualified practitioner fills in the rest
- Please see our separate handout for more information on this

Private drug plan

- Explore what is covered on your private drug plan for your child. Make sure to pay attention to if the year is “calendar year” or “school year”

Please also refer to our other handouts on Autism Spectrum Disorder