



Autism

Autism is a condition that leaves many parents terrified. One reason that autism frightens mothers and fathers so deeply is because its cause is unclear. Parents also fear that a diagnosis of autism virtually guarantees a difficult life -- not only for their child, but for their entire family. But early intervention can be tremendously beneficial.

What is Autism and how is it caused?

Simply put, autism is a defect in the development of the brain that impairs social skills. The condition can be mild or severe. The exact cause though is still unknown, but there are many theories. Philip Landrigan, M.D., M.Sc., Mount Sinai Medical Centre, in New York City, says genetics may play a strong role in the cause of autism. A new study in Paediatrics of babies who have an older sibling with autism found that nearly 19 percent of them were diagnosed with the disorder by three years of age. The link was almost three times stronger for boys: Twenty-six percent of the male infants developed autism, compared with only 9 percent of female infants. Many researchers suspect there is also a direct connection between a child's exposure to certain industrial chemicals while in utero, and the risk of brain disorders including autism.

The Diagnosis

Autism cannot be diagnosed with a brain scan, a biopsy or another medical test. It is usually first suspected by a concerned parent or doctor. A doctor will assess a child's specific behaviours. Some of these behaviours may be obvious early on in a child's life.

No one child with autism is likely to display every symptom of autism exactly as the textbook says. However, there are some general areas to watch out for.



In order for an autism diagnosis to be made, the child must have had problems in one of the following areas:

- Communication
- Socialization
- Or restricted behaviour before the age of three

There are two stages of diagnosis. The first stage is a developmental screening. The second stage involves a thorough evaluation by a multidisciplinary team.

What can I do if I suspect my child has autism?

It may seem like a daunting prospect to suspect that your child has autism. And you may be tempted to “just give them a little more time to catch up”, but consulting your doctor early on is a good idea. Autism experts believe that the earlier the treatment begins, the better the outcome. Our brains are most flexible when we are young, and the sooner we start learning techniques, the more naturally and confidently we can apply them as we get older. Remember: The sooner the better, but it’s never too late.

Knowing that your child has autism is not the end of the road, it’s the start of a journey and early detection can point you in the right direction.

