

Autism in children and young people
Information for young people,
parents, carers and educational staff

NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol

Autism in children and young people



Ymchwil Iechyd
a Gofal Cymru
Health and Care
Research Wales



Autism is a term for a condition that affects specific aspects of a person's development. Some people prefer to consider autism as a difference (neurodivergent condition) rather than as a disorder.

Autism is sometimes referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD). That is the term used in current diagnostic classifications that are used by many researchers and clinicians.

Current diagnostic systems classify ASD as a neurodevelopmental disorder (together with ADHD, communication problems, intellectual disability, specific learning disorder (e.g. dyslexia), and Tourette syndrome.

Under previous classification systems, ASD was split into autism, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, but more people are now using the broader term 'autism' instead.

Autism usually becomes apparent in early childhood, but people with less obvious autistic traits may not be recognised and diagnosed as autistic until their teenage years or later. Around 1% of the population is autistic.

Autism is more likely to be recognised and diagnosed in boys and men than girls and women. This gender gap is reducing as more women are receiving an autism diagnosis in adulthood.

No single cause

There is no single cause of autism. Research has shown that for most autistic people, multiple genetic factors play a strong role, though some environmental (non-genetic) factors may also be involved.

For a few people, rare genetic syndromes can lead to autism. Broadly, research suggests that the early development of brain systems seems to be affected, but exactly how this occurs is unclear.

No link to childhood vaccinations

Despite media reports in the past, there is no scientific evidence linking childhood vaccinations to autism, and the research which first triggered these concerns has now been thoroughly discredited and withdrawn.

A spectrum of experiences

Autistic people can experience a range of difficulties – you may have heard the phrase 'autistic spectrum'. This is another way of saying that autistic people can be affected in a wide variety of different ways, and that no two individuals will have identical difficulties or needs.

This includes intellectual ability; while some autistic individuals have intellectual disability, others have the full range of intellectual abilities.



Social communication

Autistic people tend to have some trouble with social communication and relationships.

They also often need routines to feel comfortable and have repetitive behaviours or interests. They can find it difficult to cope when these are disrupted.

Sensory difficulties

Many autistic people also have sensory difficulties, such as being hyper-sensitive to loud or unpleasant sounds.

Sometimes autistic people may also have co-occurring physical (e.g. epilepsy) or mental health problems (e.g. anxiety, eating disorders), or other neurodevelopmental and learning difficulties (such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD).

Getting help

If you think your child may be autistic, the first step is to speak to your child's teacher or GP, or in the case of a very young child, your health visitor.

If they agree that your child shows signs of autism, they will then refer them for a formal assessment. This can sometimes take time. Information from a child or young person's school will also be required as part of the process.

Multi-disciplinary assessment

Because autism can affect people in such a wide variety of ways, a child needs to be assessed by several different specialists before a formal diagnosis is made – this is known as a “multi-disciplinary” assessment.

Similarly, once they have a diagnosis, they may receive support from a multi-disciplinary team. Some areas of the UK have created neurodevelopmental clinics because autism overlaps with so many other neurodevelopmental conditions.

These specialists might include:

- a doctor or nurse in paediatrics
- a doctor or nurse in child and adolescent psychiatry,
- a clinical psychologist
- a speech and language therapist
- an occupational therapist

Again, this can vary between different services.

Strategies to help

There are no specific treatments for autism, although there are strategies to support autistic people with difficulties they may have at home or school.

These include educational adjustments, relationship-focused early interventions, and different communication systems, if needed. These aim to help with relationships, improve quality of life for autistic individuals and their families.

Helpful strategies vary greatly between individuals, so it is important that a care plan is tailored to a child or young person's specific needs.

Medication

Medication is not routinely prescribed for autism, but there are circumstances in which it may be appropriate to do so.

Some autistic people live independently as adults; however, some people may need significant ongoing support.

Autism at school

An autistic child or young person might also need support at school or college to get the most out of their learning.

Autistic people are also more likely to experience mental health problems (e.g. depression and anxiety) than non-autistic people, and to need help with these difficulties.

Tips for autistic children, young people and their families

Whether an individual or a family member has been expecting it or not, receiving a diagnosis of autism may come with all sorts of different emotions which may change over time.

The assessment process may have been lengthy and children, young people and their families are likely to have been experiencing difficulties for some time.

It is important to ask for help when a child or young person is diagnosed with autism, both for

the person themselves but also for other family members.

There are a range of local and national agencies in Wales, including social care and voluntary organisations, which are available to help autistic people and their families.

Some of these are listed on the next page of this leaflet.

Useful websites

These agencies can provide education and emotional and practical support to autistic individuals and their families.

They can put people in contact with other individuals and families in similar situations. They can also direct people to other agencies which may be helpful.

National Autistic Society

This charity offers information, support and services for autistic people and their families. It has many local branches throughout Wales.

autism.org.uk

Royal College of Psychiatrists

This site provides a patient information leaflet about autism and Asperger's syndrome, as well as other mental health information. Search 'autism' from the homepage.

rcpsych.ac.uk

Autism Wales

The website of the Welsh National Autism Team, funded by Welsh Government. Contains sections with resources and information for children, young people and adults with autism, their families, their schools, employers, and other community services.

autismwales.org



NICE (National Institute for Health and Care) Guidance

Autism diagnosis in children and young people: Recognition, referral and diagnosis of children and young people on the autism spectrum

[nice.org.uk/guidance/CG128](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG128)

Autism: recognition, referral, diagnosis and management of adults on the autism spectrum

[nice.org.uk/guidance/CG142](https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/CG142)

MindEd

MindEd contains information for anybody working with children and young people's mental health issues.

[minded.org.uk](https://www.minded.org.uk)

Young Minds

Young Minds is a charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people.

[youngminds.org.uk](https://www.youngminds.org.uk)

NHS Choices

Information on autism, including a guide for parents, key facts and real people's experiences.

[nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk)



Join our NCMH research community

Join our research community today and help us better understand conditions like autism. The aim of our research is to improve diagnosis, treatment, and support for people in the future.

Joining our community is easy - it involves completing an online sign-up form which takes about 15 minutes and will ask you about:

- personal information, like date of birth and ethnicity
- mental and physical health
- lifestyle

To join, visit: ncmh.info/join

Or scan:



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Mae'r wybodaeth hon hefyd ar gael drwy gyfrwng y Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â ni.

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