

# Autistic Disorder

It is a challenge to raise a child, but the challenge can be greater if the child is affected by a medical condition, such as **autistic disorder** (sometimes called **autism**). Autistic disorder is a developmental disorder of the nervous system. The disorder can cause lifelong emotional, behavioral, social, and communication problems.

Although there is currently no cure for autistic disorder, many of the symptoms can be treated, and with proper care some individuals with autistic disorder can lead independent lives. An article in the April 4, 2001, issue of *JAMA* reports on the treatment of an 8-year-old boy with autistic disorder.

## WHAT IS AUTISTIC DISORDER?

Autistic disorder refers to a disorder of the nervous system that affects the way the brain develops and functions, with onset before age 3 years. The disorder is characterized by problems with verbal and nonverbal (gestures and facial expressions, for example) communication, problems with social interactions, and unusually limited interests and activities.

### Common Features of Autistic Disorder

Children affected by autistic disorder do not always experience the same symptoms. The symptoms also depend on the severity of the disorder.

- **Social problems**—affected individuals may not make eye contact and may avoid physical contact such as hugging and cuddling; they may also have difficulty interpreting the meaning of gestures and facial expressions such as smiling or winking
- **Language and communication problems**—it has been estimated that half of individuals affected by autism will remain mute throughout their lives; others may experience delays in language development or only repeat what they have heard
- **Sensory problems**—for example, certain sounds can be overwhelming for the person affected by autism
- **Repetitive behavior**—for example, rocking, hand waving, or hair twirling
- **Obsession with routine and order**—for example, changes in the normal routine such as meal time and how things are placed on the table can be extremely upsetting for the person affected by autism

In many children these symptoms may improve over time with special care and treatment.

Sources: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke, National Institute of Mental Health, American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, Autism Society of America, The AMA Complete Guide to Your Children's Health, The AMA Encyclopedia of Medicine

Brian Pace, MA, Writer

Cassio Lynn, MA, Illustrator

Richard M. Glass, MD, Editor

The JAMA Patient Page is a public service of JAMA. The information and recommendations appearing on this page are appropriate in most instances, but they are not a substitute for medical diagnosis. For specific information concerning your personal medical condition, JAMA and the AMA suggest that you consult your physician. This page may be reproduced noncommercially by physicians and other health care professionals to share with patients. Any other reproduction is subject to AMA approval. To purchase bulk reprints, call 718/946-7424.

## HOW IS AUTISM TREATED?

- Early intervention programs—include educational programs and behavior training programs that emphasize developing language and social skills
- Special education—specialized education programs geared to maximize the potential of each individual, taking into consideration their special needs
- Family support—the family works with teachers and therapists to continue education and behavior training in the home and family settings
- Medication—used in some cases to treat specific symptoms associated with autistic disorder

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

- National Institute of Child Health and Human Development  
800/370-2943  
www.nichd.nih.gov
- American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry  
Public Information  
3615 Wisconsin Ave NW  
Washington, DC 20016  
www.aacap.org
- Autism Society of America  
7910 Woodmont Ave, Suite 300  
Bethesda, MD 20814  
800/328-8476 or 301/657-0881  
www.autism-society.org

## INFORM YOURSELF

To find this and previous JAMA Patient Pages, go to the Patient Page Index on JAMA's Web site at [www.jama.com](http://www.jama.com).

