

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
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Autism and Pervasive Developmental Disorders



Before 1985 the incidence of autism was around one case per 2000 to 3000 children. Today the accepted statistic is about ONE IN ONE-HUNDRED SIXTY-SIX children. That is a higher rate than all of the cancers combined, and is a fast-moving epidemic, not explained by better diagnostic techniques. It also strikes boys more than four times as frequently as girls.

Autism is a disorder of brain development that starts before a child reaches three years of age. The child's interaction and ability to communicate with others is impaired, his or her behavior and interests become restricted and often repetitive. A milder form, called autism spectrum disorders (ASD) also exists.

Causes may be genetic, but there is evidence that certain agents in the environment are the causes. Some researchers claim that it is the mercury-based preservative, thimerosal (also spelled thiomersal), found in vaccines, that is to blame. Environmental activist, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has fought an uphill battle against the use of thimerosal by large pharmaceutical corporations which use this agent in many vaccines, including flu vaccines; it has been clearly demonstrated that thimerosal kills nerve cells and has been linked by some scientists to other brain disorders, including Alzheimer disease.

The hepatitis-B vaccine given to a newborn baby has a dose of thimerosal in it that is not suitable for anyone weighing less than 275 pounds.

Other environmental factors cited or being investigated are certain foods, heavy metals, organic solvents, truck exhaust, different chemicals that leach out of plastic (like PCBs, phtalates, and phenols), flame retardants, alcohol, smoking, some illicit drugs, and even prenatal stress. There may be multiple causes for this exploding epidemic, but the mercury compound in vaccines is still the chief suspect.

Autism cannot be cured, but early intervention can help children learn some communication skills, and learn to take care of themselves. Most cannot live independently as adults. The disorder never goes into remission.

Autism is known as a pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) consisting of several syndromes, all of which share the same characteristics of abnormal communication and social interaction. It affects different parts of the brain and is not well understood. The ADD children are not emotionally disturbed, nor sick, nor delicate, but their lives are very restricted in their interests or interactions.

The other forms of PDD are: Asperger syndrome (named after the man who was the premier autism researcher, Hans Asperger), which is very close to autism; Rett syndrome, and; childhood disintegrative disorder. The symptoms of all are similar but may have different causes. One other PDD disorder is known as PDD-NOS (not otherwise specified). Though there are differences, these names are sometimes all called autism or ASD.

Many children with autism avoid eye-contact; some are silent; some seem mentally disabled and continually rock their bodies or their hands. There are different degrees of functionality and some children need more help or support than others. There are some kinds of autism where a normally developing child suddenly loses his or her language ability; this is called regressive autism.

Many individuals with autism lack the normal intuition that others have about human behavior and social communication, and don't understand smiles or other body language, and don't understand others' emotions. They become attached to their caregivers but respond less to their own names or look less at others. Because they have difficulty making friendships, many are lonely (although it is widely and erroneously believed that they are not).

About two thirds of autistic children can have temper tantrums, fits of aggression, and can cause property destruction or even injury to self or others. From one third to one half of autistic children don't develop enough speech skills to be able to adequately

communicate, and may do so by babbling, making strange gestures, or repeating what others say.

They like things to be the same, household objects to be in the same place, or participate in other compulsive behavior; they may like to see the same TV show or movie again and again. They may injure themselves, as by biting themselves. They do a lot of repetitive motions, such as body rocking, hand flapping, and other such continuous motions.

There are other unusual symptoms sometimes displayed, such as oversensitivity to noise, under-sensitivity to motor skills causing them to walk into objects or exhibit toe-walking. Sometimes they refuse some foods and sometimes they ritually demand certain foods. They also have a history of various food problems. They also may have sleep problems.

The most fascinating phenomenon is that of autistic savants. These individuals have a very deep memory in a very narrow range, allowing them to process mental calculations and counts at incredible rates of speed, or a marvelous capacity for memorizing facts and figures, often in the realm of trivia.

Being the parents of children with ASD can be very stressful indeed, whereas brothers and sisters of these children can get along quite well as children, but this relationship may deteriorate as the children grow into adults.

TIP OF THE WEEK: A recent study of the American Heart Association has shown that overweight and obese children have larger hearts, thicker vessel walls, and diminished function of the left ventricle of the heart than other children of normal weight. These children have the hearts of older individuals – in other words, their hearts are aging prematurely, and this condition worsens as the child becomes an adult.