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## Autism

Autism is a neuro-chemical dysfunction of the brain of unknown cause. It alters the child's ability to communicate and socialise. It comes on before the child is 2 ½ years old and may be associated with learning disability. It may however be difficult to ascertain the child's intellect because of communication difficulty. Autistic children are often withdrawn, they need "sameness" and often get very upset when even small environmental changes are made. They may have problems with language development and in playing with others. Boys are affected more than girls and genetics play an important part. In twin studies, if there is an affected identical twin, then the other twin will have an 80% chance of being affected and with non-identical twins, this falls to 20%. Brain injury, perhaps occurring during pregnancy has also been mooted as a possible cause. Relatives of autistic children will often have difficulty processing language. There is some evidence that serotonin is found in a higher concentration in children with autism. It used to be thought that autism was due to poor parenting and although this is not the case, some parents may show some mildly autistic features.

### What to look for

Symptoms of autism come on before 2 ½ years of age. They tend to be withdrawn, like playing on their own and experience difficulty when playing with other children. There may have delayed language development and some may never develop language at all. Eye contact may be poor and they are likely to have difficulty with games that involve taking turns. They have trouble with pretend and imaginative play. They may indulge in repetitive movements such as rocking. Over half the children with autism will have some degree of learning disability.

### What to do

A child with symptoms of autism needs to be seen by a Paediatrician who may make a referral to a Neurologist or Psychiatrist with experience in treating such children. Other conditions mimic autism so your doctor may well want to do some tests which will include a thorough physical examination, along with an IQ and hearing test, a brain scan and EEG (an electroencephalogram, a painless recording of the electrical brain waves). Your doctor may also want to do some blood tests to look for metabolic problems (problems with the way your child's body handles nutrients and other body chemicals), a screen for poisons and also chromosome tests.

If it is confirmed that your child does suffer from autism, there are several types of treatment.

- A) Behaviour therapy, where your child is helped to learn new patterns of behaviour when interacting with others and unlearn unhelpful behaviour patterns.
- B) Educational therapy, where a very structured school setting may help your child to communicate better and to learn social skills.
- C) Medical therapy, with various types of medicines, including anti-depressants and haloperidol which may cause a significant improvement.

### Ask to see a paediatrician if

Your child is withdrawn and is having difficulties communicating with others. If your child has never learnt to speak or his speech is delayed. If your child has poor eye contact, has difficulty playing participation games with other children, has problems with sharing and give and take or has problems with symbolic play.