



# Autism Awareness Month



## What is Autism? An Overview

Autism is a complex neurobiological disorder that typically lasts throughout a person's lifetime. It is part of a group of disorders known as autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Today, 1 in 150 individuals is diagnosed with autism, making it more common than pediatric cancer, diabetes, and AIDS combined. It occurs in all racial, ethnic, and social groups and is four times more likely to strike boys than girls. Autism impairs a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. It is also associated with rigid routines and repetitive behaviors, such as obsessively arranging objects or following very specific routines. Symptoms can range from very mild to quite severe.

Autism was first identified in 1943 by Dr. Leo Kanner of Johns Hopkins Hospital. At the same time, a German scientist, Dr. Hans Asperger, described a milder form of the disorder that is now known as Asperger Syndrome. These two disorders are listed in the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as two of the five developmental disorders that fall under the autism spectrum disorders. The others are Rett Syndrome, PDD NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder), and Childhood Disintegrative Disorder. All of these disorders are characterized by varying degrees of impairment in communication skills and social abilities, and also by repetitive behaviors.

Autism spectrum disorders can usually be reliably diagnosed by age 3, although new research is pushing back the age of diagnosis to as early as 6 months. Parents are usually the first to notice unusual behaviors in their child or their child's failure to reach appropriate developmental milestones. Some parents describe a child that seemed different from birth, while others describe a child who was developing normally and then lost skills. Pediatricians may initially dismiss signs of autism, thinking a child will "catch up," and may advise parents to "wait and see." New research shows that when parents suspect something is wrong with their child, they are usually correct. If you have concerns about your child's development, don't wait: speak to your pediatrician about getting your child screened for autism.

If your child is diagnosed with autism, early intervention is critical to gain maximum benefit from existing therapies. Although parents may have concerns about labeling a toddler as "autistic," the earlier the diagnosis is made, the earlier interventions can begin. Currently, there are no effective means to prevent autism, no fully effective treatments, and



no cure. Research indicates, however, that early intervention in an appropriate educational setting for at least two years during the preschool years can result in significant improvements for many young children with autism spectrum disorders. As soon as autism is diagnosed, early intervention instruction should begin. Effective programs focus on developing communication, social, and cognitive skills.

## Facts about Autism

- 1 in 94 boys is on the autism spectrum
- 67 children are diagnosed per day
- Autism is the fastest-growing serious developmental disability in the U.S.
- Autism costs the nation over \$90 billion per year, a figure expected to double in the next decade
- Autism receives less than 5% of the research funding of many less prevalent childhood diseases

## Incidence vs. Private Funding

**Leukemia:** Affects 1 in 25,000 / Funding: \$310 million

**Muscular Dystrophy:** Affects 1 in 20,000 / Funding: \$175 million

**Pediatric AIDS:** Affects 1 in 8,000 / Funding: \$394 million

**Juvenile Diabetes:** Affects 1 in 500 / Funding: \$130 million

**Autism:** Affects 1 in 150 / Funding: \$15 million

Total 2005 National Institutes of Health Funds budget: \$29 billion; Of this, only \$100 million goes towards autism research. This represents 0.3% of total NIH funding.