Diagnosing Autism

Autism is a complex developmental disability that typically manifests itself during the first three years of life. Autism is considered a “spectrum disorder,” affecting individuals differently and to varying degrees.

There is no single known cause for autism. Among origins being investigated are genetic errors, some inherited and others occurring spontaneously. Other researchers are exploring whether viral infections, metabolic imbalances, or air pollutants play a role in causing autism. Recent research suggests that having an older father may increase a child’s risk of autism. One of the greatest controversies has been whether childhood vaccines, especially those with thimerosal, a preservative containing a small amount of mercury, play a role. In recent years extensive and well-documented studies have found no link between autism and vaccines.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that pediatricians screen all children specifically for autism at 18 months and 24 months of age. In addition, parents should consult with pediatricians at every well-baby visit about any developmental concerns. “Red flags” that indicate immediate evaluation by a specialist is needed include: no babbling or pointing by 12 months, no single word said by 16 months, no two-word phrases by 24 months, or loss of previously acquired language skills at any age. In addition, children suspected of having autism may show some of the following traits:

- Resistance to change; need for sameness in all things
- Little or no eye contact
- Difficulty expressing needs
- Repeating words or phrases rather than using normal, responsive language
- Preference for being alone; difficulty in relating to adults or children
- Extreme attachment to hard objects like pens rather than blankets or stuffed toys
- Not wanting to be hugged or cuddled
- Fascination with spinning or repetitive movement of objects
- Unusual sensitivity to light, sound and touch but unawareness of pain

The advantages of early diagnosis and intervention are immense. Although there is no known “cure,” studies show that early diagnosis and treatment lead to significantly improved outcomes, because the youngest brains are the most flexible. There are no medical tests for diagnosing autism. Whether a parent or pediatrician is the first to suspect autism, the child needs to be observed and evaluated by a developmental pediatrician or a psychiatrist or psychologist who specializes in diagnosing autism spectrum disorders. Treatment options can then be determined.

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