



## SCREENING AND DIAGNOSING CHILDREN WITH AUTISM

Autism is a disability that affects the skills needed to socialize, communicate, and cooperate with other people. Autism begins in childhood—signs and symptoms are most likely noticeable before age 3—but may be subtle or thought to be something that the child will “grow out of.” Health care providers need to screen every child for autism because finding it early improves outcomes for most young children.

America’s physicians specializing in diseases of the nervous system, who make up the American Academy of Neurology and the Child Neurology Society, think you should know about and understand the medical or screening tests your child may undergo. A group of doctors studied the research to find out the best ways to screen and identify a child with possible autism. Information in this tool comes from the best scientific evidence available.

**You may have many questions about screening for and diagnosing autism such as:**

- What regular screening tests should your child’s doctor do?
- If your doctor suspects autism, what other tests should be done?
- If autism is suspected or diagnosed, what can be done to help your child?
- What does autism mean for your child’s future?

### What regular screening tests should your child’s doctor do?

Experts point out that it is very important to screen for developmental delays at regular well-child visits. Screening should start when your child is an infant and continue through school age. These tests might include:

*Age-appropriate skill development* refers to skills that a child is expected to have because most children their age have them. The doctor should ask about loss of talking or social skills at any age. The questions should include verbal and non-verbal skills, attention, and how children interact with others. For example:

- At about 1 year, children should babble and gesture (pointing, waving bye-bye)
- At about 16 months, they should say single words
- At about 2 years, they should say two-word phrases on their own

*Screening tools* are tests that have been tested on large groups of children. Your doctor can choose from several tools to screen for autism. Good research states the Checklist for Autism in Toddlers and the Autism Screening Questionnaire are useful to screen for autism. Other important screening includes tests to see if there are problems with the ears and with hearing.

*Parental feedback* is very helpful for finding out how the child is developing. Be sure to tell your child’s doctor if you notice any changes or have concerns about your child’s progress.

### If the doctor suspects autism, what other medical tests should be done?

Even though teachers, parents, and other health care providers may notice signs of autism, a doctor who knows about autism should examine your child to make a diagnosis.

The doctor will watch your child interact, talk to you about your child’s social and language skills, and discuss your child’s behavior. To help reach a diagnosis, your doctor may need to order some other tests for your child. These tests can help identify reasons for your child’s autism. The doctor will also take a family medical history to see if other family members have autism or other inherited disorders. He or she will examine your child to see if there are signs of one of the rare conditions that may cause autism.

Autism differs from child to child in its severity and symptoms. This makes diagnosis difficult. If your child’s symptoms are very mild or if your child has other conditions, signs of autism may be difficult to notice.

*Genetic tests* may be ordered because some causes of autism may be inherited—or genetic.

- Genetic testing can provide information about any specific inherited problems, genetic defects, or nervous system abnormalities your child may have.
- Fragile X is caused by an inherited change in a specific gene. A few autistic children test positive for Fragile X. The doctor should order the test if there is a family history of developmental problems, retardation, or if your child has certain physical signs.

*Metabolic tests* may be ordered to see if there is a genetic or non-genetic condition that affects the child. A doctor might order metabolic tests if there are other specific symptoms such as early onset seizures.

*Lead screening* may be ordered if there is a risk that your child might have lead poisoning. Since some children with autism tend to eat non-food items and lead may be found in paint chips, your doctor may order a blood test for lead screening.

*EEG tests* may be performed if the doctor suspects epilepsy or in children whose language and other skills have regressed.

*Brain imaging tests (CT or MRI)* are rarely helpful, but a neurologist might order these tests for some children.

*Psychological tests and speech and language tests* are likely to be ordered to help plan for your child's education.

### **If autism is suspected or diagnosed, what can be done to help your child?**

There is no medicine or other medical treatment to cure autism, but many special learning programs can help your child improve a great deal. Psychologists and education specialists will help you decide what meets your child's particular needs. There are some medicines that may help very difficult behaviors, especially in older children. If you believe your child needs one of these medicines, consult your physician.

### **What does autism mean for your child's future?**

Because there are so many differences in severity and symptoms, it is not possible to predict the future in very young children. Young children change so much that it is rarely possible to state which child will require continued special education and other interventions in the future.

### **Talk to a doctor or child neurologist**

Together you and your child's doctor can choose the tests that work best for you and your child, based on the information you want and need. A child neurologist can provide more information and resources to help patients and caregivers make the best choices. Make sure that your child is seen regularly to evaluate progress and decide whether changes in education or treatment are needed as your child grows and matures.

This is an evidence-based educational service of the American Academy of Neurology. It is designed to provide members with evidence-based guideline recommendations to assist with decision-making in patient care. It is based on an assessment of current scientific and clinical information, and is not intended to exclude any reasonable alternative methodologies. The AAN recognizes that specific patient care decisions are the prerogative of the patient and the physician caring for the patient, based on the circumstances involved. Physicians are encouraged to carefully review the full AAN guidelines so they understand all recommendations associated with care of these patients.



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