

Developmental delays can signal the presence of an autism spectrum disorder.

Find out why early screening is important.

Is It Autism?

A child with long hair, wearing a white t-shirt and light-colored pants, is walking away from the viewer through a circular opening in a dark tunnel. The child is walking towards a bright, green outdoor area with trees and a bench. The tunnel's interior is dark and textured, creating a strong contrast with the bright light outside.

By Colleen Marble

As a parent, you've probably spent hours poring over books, Web sites, and magazine articles to determine if your child is developing normally. While there is a wide range of "normal," most children hit milestones like smiling, crawling, walking, and talking at about the same age.

But what if your child consistently lags behind his peers, especially in communication and social skills? You might be tempted to "wait it out" or chalk it up to shyness, but it is wise to resist that temptation. Instead, think about having your child screened for an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Red Flags

This broad label covers five related developmental disorders: autism, Asperger syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, Rett syndrome, and "pervasive developmental disorder" (PDD).

ASDs (referred to here as "autism") are difficult to define in broad terms because the symptoms and their severity vary from person to person. However, the National Institute of Child Health & Human Development has created a list of typical "red flags" that may point to autism.

Consider having your 18-month old screened if he:

- Doesn't respond to his name
- Is slow to develop language skills
- Doesn't point or wave "bye-bye"
- Used to say a few words or babble, but now he doesn't
- Throws intense or violent tantrums
- Seems to tune people out
- Is not interested in other children
- Doesn't smile when smiled at
- Resists changes in routine
- Has poor eye contact
- Doesn't pretend or play "make believe"

(For a complete list, visit www.nichd.nih.gov, keyword "autism.")

The Power of Early Detection

Because autism is a genetic disorder, there is no single treatment or medication that can "cure" it. However, early identification and intervention, through medication and therapy, can limit symptoms and help the child enjoy a better quality of life.

"The focus in the past was on identifying children when language problems became clear, around the age of three," says Paul Lipkin, M.D., FAAP, director for the Center of Development and Learning at the Kennedy Krieger Institute and immediate past chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Children with Disabilities. "But now there's research to suggest that you can identify key issues at an earlier age."

As a result, the AAP now recommends that pediatricians screen children for autism at 18 months of age. But if you notice that your child is delayed at an earlier age, or if you are concerned that he is not meeting developmental milestones at any age, talk to his doctor.

"We know that when parents voice concern about a child's development, more often than not they are correct that there is a developmental concern," says Dr. Lipkin, who also serves as an assistant professor of pediatrics at The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. "We are now making active efforts to get pediatricians to

recognize these concerns earlier, so that they don't give that old advice 'let's wait' or 'boys will be boys.'"

Improved Awareness, Better Treatment

These efforts are paying off. Many experts have attributed the increased prevalence of autism in recent years not to a greater incidence of the disorder itself but to improved awareness of the early signs and symptoms by parents and pediatricians alike. In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently revised the autism diagnosis rate from 5 in 10,000 to roughly 6 in 1,000 (or nearly 1 in 150) children.

"I think that health care providers and physicians, as well as parents, now are more sensitive to these concerns than they were previously, so there is an increase in identification," says Dr. Lipkin.

Getting Past the Myths

Improved awareness, along with a number of research projects, also is helping to reduce the social stigma associated with autism and dispel some of the myths.

"There has been a feeling that autism is a problem of children's emotions or that it relates to how parents raise their child," explains Lipkin. "In fact, we know it's primarily a problem in communication that children are born with that just becomes apparent over time."

Another myth is that routine vaccinations can bring on autism in a normally developing child. Many studies have looked at this claim and, to date, none have found any scientific evidence to support it. "There are a lot of people suggesting that there are things in the environment or in vaccines that are causing autism," notes Lipkin. "It's not environmentally caused. It's something that's congenital."

To avoid the myths and misconceptions, concerned parents should always start with their child's pediatrician, who can rule out other medical conditions and evaluate the child using a simple screening test. ●

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Facts Online

Looking for more? These highly respected Web sites offer information on autism, including signs, symptoms, treatment options, patient rights, and more.

- <http://www.medicalhomeinfo.org/health/autism.html>
- www.cdc.gov/actearly
- www.autismspeaks.org
- www.firstsigns.org