

Patient information from BMJ

Last published: Jan 14, 2021

Autism spectrum disorder: information for parents - What treatments work?

People with autism are affected by it in some way throughout their lives. But this information mainly deals with recognising and treating autism in children.

Finding out that your child has autism can be very upsetting. But understanding autism and getting help early on can make a difference to your child's life and to yours.

We've brought together the best and most up-to-date research about autism to see what treatments work. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for your child.

What treatments work?

If your child has autism it means that his or her brain works in a different way from most children's brains. This affects how your child develops.

From the outside, children with autism usually grow like, and look like, other children. But children with autism don't develop the skills they need to get along well with others or to keep up in school in the same way as other children.

For example, you may have noticed that your child was different, even as a small baby. Most children with autism show clear signs of their condition by the time they're 3 years old.

Treatment may help your child with some issues caused by autism. For example, it might help them with language skills and fitting in at school.

The main treatments for autism involve special methods of teaching your child and helping change how they behave. Treatment seems to help most if you start while your child is still young.

It's important to remember that treatments can't cure autism or change how your child's brain works. They can only help them interact better with other people and the world around them.

Autism spectrum disorder: information for parents - What treatments work?

Different children need different types and levels of treatment. For example, a child who doesn't speak may need different treatments from those children who do speak. Your doctor should look at your child's strengths and needs before suggesting a particular treatment.

Education

There are various programmes aimed at helping children with autism to learn, communicate, and interact better. We discuss some of them below. But they may not all be available where you live. In some places treatments like this will have slightly different names.

Early education means giving your child extra help with learning basic skills, such as speaking, before they start school. If you choose to do this in a programme with a specialist, you will get training in how to help your child.

Applied behavioural analysis (ABA) is a behavioural programme for treating young children (age 2 to 3 years). It uses a system of rewards to reinforce positive behaviours and discourage what are seen as negative behaviours.

The **ASD pre-school programme** is for pre-school children with severe social and communication problems. It offers parents and carers help with their child's behaviour and language skills.

More Than Words is a programme designed to help parents of children below 6 years of age, with and without autism, who are having problems with social interaction and communication.

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped Children (TEACCH) is a structured programme used in schools to help children with autism to learn and communicate.

Child's Talk uses video feedback to encourage closer communication between parent and child.

Medicines

Most children with autism don't need medicines. But doctors sometimes recommend medicines to help with specific symptoms. Below are some of the medicines that doctors sometimes suggest for children with autism.

Risperidone is a medicine sometimes recommended for older children who have problems with aggression or irritability, or who are in danger of hurting themselves. It can help to calm some children. But it has side effects, such as weight gain and raised blood pressure. If your child is prescribed risperidone, your doctor should monitor him or her regularly.

Methylphenidate (better known as Ritalin) is another drug that may make some children less hyperactive and irritable. It is often used to help children with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but it doesn't work as well in children with autism, and it has similar side effects to risperidone.

Autism spectrum disorder: information for parents - What treatments work?

Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are antidepressants that are usually used to treat depression. But doctors may prescribe them for adolescents with autism who also have depression or anxiety.

Other drugs are sometimes used to help children with other symptoms such as sleep problems, and problems concentrating. If your doctor suggests medicines to help your child, he or she should discuss the possible benefits and side effects with you and your child.

Diets, supplements, and alternative treatments

Good nutrition is important for all children, but there are no special dietary needs with autism.

Several diets and supplements have been suggested as treatments for autism. But there is no good evidence that any of them have any effect on symptoms of autism.

You should be wary about any 'alternative' or 'complementary' therapies for autism that you may hear or read about. Some of them may be harmful.

You should always talk to your doctor or a dietitian before making any major changes to what your child eats or before giving your child supplements or any other treatment for autism.

Where to get more help

There are many charities and support groups for autistic people. Your doctor may be able to help you find one in your area. For example, in the UK, the National Autistic Society (www.autism.org.uk) offers help and support to people with autism and their families.

The patient information from *BMJ Best Practice* from which this leaflet is derived is regularly updated. The most recent version of Best Practice can be found at bestpractice.bmj.com. This information is intended for use by health professionals. It is not a substitute for medical advice. It is strongly recommended that you independently verify any interpretation of this material and, if you have a medical problem, see your doctor.

Please see BMJ's full terms of use at: bmj.com/company/legal-information. BMJ does not make any representations, conditions, warranties or guarantees, whether express or implied, that this material is accurate, complete, up-to-date or fit for any particular purposes.

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2021. All rights reserved.

