

# Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

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## Recognizing the Warning Signs of Autism Early Screening Guidelines for Autism in Childhood and Toddlers

**Parents often know in their guts that something's not right. But they may not be able to express their concerns. And it can take months or years for doctors to make a definite diagnosis of an autism spectrum disorder (ASD), such as autistic disorder or Asperger syndrome.**

### What is Autism?

Autism is a developmental disorder that appears in the first three years of life, and affects the brain's normal development of social and communication skills. Asperger syndrome is often considered a high functioning form of autism. People with this syndrome have difficulty interacting socially, repeat behaviors and often are clumsy. Motor milestones may be delayed.

### Early Screening for Autism

To help identify at-risk children, all toddlers should now be screened for ASD under guidelines set by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). These developmental screenings can help parents and doctors pinpoint early warning signs of autism so that treatment can start sooner. Although there's no cure for autism, early intervention can help a child reach his or her full potential.

The AAP guidelines call for screening much earlier than before. They now suggest screening all children for signs of autism at 18 and 24 months of age, whether or not a parent has any concerns. Doctors can use autism screening tools that assess language, social interaction and other aspects of development at well-child visits.

### Further Evaluation

Major risk factors for autism include a sibling who has been diagnosed with autism or concern from the child's parent, another caregiver or the child's doctor. If any of these risk factors are present, then the child's doctor will proceed with further screening and close follow-up. Two or more risk factors will prompt a referral for a more complete evaluation.

Doctors consider the following red flags that warrant immediate evaluation:

- Not babbling or pointing by 12 months of age
- Not using single words by 16 months of age
- Not using two-word spontaneous phrases by 24 months of age
- Loss of language or social skills at any age

Sometimes a hearing problem can cause language delays. The doctor may rule this out by checking your child's ears for fluid or referring him for a hearing test.

### Communicate with Your Child's Doctor

Share with your child's doctor any concerns you have about his or her language development and social skills, especially if he or she has lost language or social skills. About one in four children with autism and

other conditions related to autism begin to say words, but then stop speaking. This may happen between 15 and 24 months of age. They may also lose other communication skills, including pointing, waving and eye contact. This is called regression, and parents should always tell their doctor about it.

## **Beginning Treatment**

Treatment can start even before a formal diagnosis of autism. Early intervention, including speech and language therapy and behavioral interventions, appears to have long-term benefits for kids with autism and can help them reach their full potential.

## **Further Reading**

**<http://www.autism-society.org/>**

A comprehensive website from The Autism Society, the nation's leading grassroots autism organization, which features information on symptoms, diagnosis and treatments.

**<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/screening.html>**

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's webpage on the screening and diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders.

**<http://www.firstsigns.org/screening/guidelines.htm>**

Informative screening guidelines and talking points for your physician produced by First Signs, an organization dedicated to educating parents and professionals about autism and related disorders.

**<http://www.aap.org/pressroom/AutismID.pdf>**

The American Academy of Pediatrics report titled Identification and Evaluation of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders addresses background information, including definition, history and early signs of autism spectrum disorders.

***Could it Be Autism? A Parent's Guide to the First Signs and Next Steps***, by Nancy D. Wiseman (Broadway Books, 2006).

## **Early Signs of Autism**

Signs of autism are usually recognizable before a child is three years old. Looking for these symptoms can lead to earlier diagnosis and treatment. Tell your child's doctor if you notice that your baby:

- Smiles late or very little, occurs in first few months of life
- Seldom makes eye contact with people, starts around two to four months old
- Doesn't turn when you say his or her name, occurs around age eight to ten months
- Doesn't turn or look when you point or say "look at this," occurs around age ten to 12 months
- Doesn't point at objects or people, occurs about 12 to 14 months old
- Doesn't babble back and forth, begins at about six months of age; Between eight and ten months, babbling becomes more complex with more syllables
- Demonstrates unusual movements, such as hand flapping, spinning, tapping or playing with the same toy in a way that seems odd or repetitive

- Doesn't explore surroundings with curiosity or interest

## **Resources**

### **OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions**

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.  
[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

- Search for these articles and more: "Autism: Sibling Issues," "Your Child Has Been Diagnosed with Autism. Now What?," Raising a Child with Autism: Paige and Iain's Story."

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