

WHAT TO EXPECT DURING AN AUTISM EVALUATION

There are currently no medical tests that can be used to diagnose ASD. A diagnosis is made by observing and recording the presence or absence of certain behaviors, either during a face-to-face meeting or through family members' reports. Autism evaluations differ depending on the person's age, needs, and the setting in which the evaluation takes place. The evaluation may be completed by a developmental pediatrician or psychiatrist, a clinical or school psychologist, or with a team of professionals. It may be completed in one day, or may span several days or weeks, and may involve various types of assessments of intelligence, speech/language development, adaptive abilities, medical conditions, and academic progress.



WHAT IS AUTISM?

Autism Spectrum Disorder is a developmental disorder of the brain that makes it difficult for individuals to communicate and socialize with others and causes individuals to engage in repetitive behaviors or have extreme interests. The term "spectrum" refers to a wide span of symptoms individuals can display. There is also a range of severity, with some individuals being mildly affected and others being severely impaired.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AUTISM?



Every individual with autism is different and may show a different set of symptoms, however all individuals with autism have difficulty interacting and communicating with others and show repetitive behaviors. Socially, they may have little interest in interacting or playing with others or have difficulty making friendships, understanding others' perspectives, or following social rules. Some individuals lack or have very delayed language skills while more verbal individuals have difficulty with the give and take of communication. Nonverbal communication deficits are also present and include lack of appropriate eye contact, delayed use of or response to gestures, or unusual intonation. Repetitive behaviors can take a wide variety of forms, from significant difficulty coping with changes to repetitive speech and body movements and extremely intense interests.

HOW IS AN INDIVIDUAL WITH AUTISM DIAGNOSED?

There are currently no medical tests that can be used to diagnose ASD. Diagnosis is based on the presence or absence of observable behaviors that are recorded via interview and direct observation. A specially trained physician or psychologist or a multidisciplinary team of professionals typically conducts an ASD evaluation. Depending on where the evaluation is done and who is involved, it may be completed over the course of one day or several weeks, and it may involve intelligence, speech/language, adaptive, medical, and academic assessment.

WHAT PROFESSIONALS MAY BE INVOLVED?

A developmental pediatrician is a medical doctor who typically has specialized training in developmental disorders and genetic and medical conditions that might be associated with ASD. They will often do a physical exam in order to rule out medical causes. A psychiatrist is a medical doctor that specializes in the diagnosis and medical treatment of mental illness. Some psychiatrists may also specialize in counseling. Psychologists also have training in diagnosing and treating a wide range of developmental, behavioral, and emotional disorders, conduct psychological assessments, and can help differentiate ASD from other conditions. Social workers specialize in counseling and connecting families to local resources. Speech language pathologists focus specifically on evaluating language and communication skills. Occupational therapists may evaluate factors that impede an individual's independence and daily functioning such as basic life skills, motor skills, coordination and body awareness, and adaptive strategies, including coping with transitions and emotional regulation.

HOW DO I PREPARE FOR AN AUTISM EVALUATION?

Ask questions about the assessment to find out who will be involved and how long it will take. Share this information with your child or family member that is being assessed so they are prepared. Review past reports, baby pictures, or memorable events to help refresh your memory on how the individual functioned in the past. Jot down notes you want to share with the professionals or questions you want to ask. Be sure to get plenty of rest.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT ON THE EVALUATION DAY?

An autism evaluation typically consists of direct interactions with the individual as well as the collection of information from other family members or caregivers. This information can provide insight into the individual's developmental, medical, educational, and social history and

current concerns. Individuals participating in the evaluation are also often asked to complete questionnaires. The specific components of the team evaluation (i.e. cognitive and academic evaluation, speech/language testing, motor and adaptive skills assessment, and physical exam) depend on the individual's specific areas of concerns, as well as whether the individual has had recent evaluations in these areas.

WHAT SPECIFIC ASSESSMENT TOOLS ARE USED?

The assessment tools used will depend on the individual's age.

Common screening and diagnostic tools include the:

- Autism Spectrum Rating Scales (ASRSTM)
- Autism Diagnostic Observation Schedule – Second Edition (ADOS-2)
- Childhood Autism Rating Scale, Second Edition (CARS2)
- Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers (M-CHAT)
- Psychoeducational Profile - 3 (PEP-3)
- Screening Tool for Autism in Toddlers and Young Children (STAT)
- Social Communication Questionnaire (SCQ)

WHAT ARE THE CURRENT DIAGNOSTIC CRITERIA FOR AUTISM?

There are several guides for autism diagnostic criteria, the main two being the DSM-5 released by the American Psychiatric Association and primarily used in the United States, and the ICD-11 released by the World Health Organization and used in Britain and Europe, although both are used by clinicians in all countries. While there are differences in areas such as terminology and categories between these two criteria, the behavior markers are considered overlapping and a diagnosis by either criteria is treated as a valid indicator of autism.

AUTISM EVALUATION RESULTS

After the professional or team of professionals have reviewed the individual's history and test results, an interpretive conference is held in which results are reviewed and the next steps are discussed. Ideally, this is a chance for parents and family members to have their questions answered and to express their thoughts and concerns. Depending on their age, the individual with autism may be involved in this conference. Typically, at or soon after this meeting, a full report with more detailed results about the evaluation is provided.