



# Facts about autism

## and the University of Washington Autism Center

Autism is not a rare disorder. It affects one in 110 people and is more common than Down Syndrome and childhood cancer.

Autism is a neurologically based developmental disability, not an emotional disorder.

Unlike many other disorders, autism can be detected with the proper knowledge as early as 18 months of age, offering hope for intervention during the time when the brain is most plastic. Most health professionals do not recognize autism until a child is 3 to 4 years old — when the optimal time for early intervention has passed. The UW Autism Center is addressing the need for earlier diagnosis by increasing community outreach and professional education opportunities.

Many children with autism show a dramatic response to early intensive behavioral interventions, and most are helped substantially. For example, early intervention can result in a significant increase in IQ and language ability and a decrease in support services needed later in childhood. Intensive early intervention yields a financial benefit, too, saving approximately \$2 million over a lifetime for each person affected with the disorder. The impact on quality of life is immeasurable for people with autism and their families.

The University of Washington has an internationally recognized autism research program. A team of more than 35 UW scientists collaborates on research of early diagnosis and intervention, brain development, neurobiological and genetic bases of autism, and drug discovery. The UW Autism Center serves the greater Puget Sound region and provides a model of collaborative research and service delivery worldwide.

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Photo by Towie Neu

## Early signs of autism spectrum disorders.

Even “normal” children exhibit some of these behaviors from time to time. The symptoms of autism and Asperger’s, by contrast, are persistent and debilitating:

- No pointing by 1 year
- No baby talk by 1 year; no single words by 16 months; no two-word phrases by 24 months
- Any loss of language skills at any time
- No pretend playing
- Little interest in making friends
- Extremely short attention span
- No response when called by name; indifference to others
- Little or no eye contact
- Repetitive body movements, such as hand flapping or rocking
- Intense tantrums
- Fixation on a single object, such as a spinning fan
- Inflexibility or unusually strong resistance to changes in routines
- Oversensitivity to certain sounds, textures, or smells
- Difficulty making friends
- Difficulty reading or communicating nonverbal social cues, such as facial expressions
- No understanding that others may have thoughts or feelings different from his or her own
- Obsessive focus on a narrow interest, such as reciting train schedules
- Awkward motor skills
- Mechanical, almost robotic patterns of speech