

key points

SELECTED BY

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Autism is a set of neurodevelopmental conditions

characterised by difficulties in social communication, alongside unusually narrow interests and strongly repetitive behaviour. Autism occurs in about 1% of people, which may be as many as 605,000 individuals in the UK. Individuals with autism can function well in certain environments, where there are fewer demands to multitask and factual information and pattern recognition are required, but they may not function well in highly social environments, or situations characterised by rapid and unpredictable change.

Autism has high heritability. Having an older sibling

with autism increases the likelihood of autism in the next sibling by 20-32.2% and around 20% of parents of children with autism have a high number of autistic traits. NICE recommends that, when considering referral to the autism team, account should be taken of factors associated with increased prevalence of autism. GPs need to consider the family history and to take a detailed obstetric history when considering the possibility of autism. Screening tools may enable GPs to make informed decisions about whether the patient presenting to them is showing signs of autism which might warrant further investigation. However, the guideline also recommends that patients should be referred if autism is suspected based on clinical judgement.

GPs may be the first point of contact for parents who may

be concerned that their child has autism, as well as for adults who feel that they themselves may be autistic. Autism symptoms generally manifest in early childhood. Signs and symptoms of autism in young children include: deficits or delays in the emergence of joint attention and pretend play, reduced reciprocal affective behaviour, decreased response to hearing one's own name, reduced imitation, delayed verbal and nonverbal communication, motor delay, and unusually repetitive behaviours. In older children, social or motor coordination skills may be poorly developed, while particular areas of knowledge, reading or vocabulary are advanced for chronological or mental age.

Diagnostic assessment should be multidisciplinary. NICE

recommends that detailed questions about the caregiver's concerns and, if appropriate, the patient's concerns, be taken into consideration. Early intensive behavioural intervention (EIBI) is the most studied treatment model for autistic children, it is intensive (> 20 hours/week), and long-term (> 2 years). There is now a body of evidence that indicates targeted intervention, designed to address a relatively narrow but pivotal goal or set of skills, in contrast to the comprehensiveness of EIBI, can be helpful to autistic children.