

Physical and Medical Issues that May Accompany Autism

Seizure disorders

Seizure Disorder, also called **epilepsy**, occurs in as many as one third of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Epilepsy is a brain disorder marked by recurring seizures or convulsions. Experts propose that some of the brain abnormalities that are associated with autism may contribute to seizures. These abnormalities can cause changes in brain activity by disrupting neurons in the brain. Neurons are cells in the brain that process and transmit information and send signals to the rest of the body. Overloads or disturbances in the activity of these neurons can result in imbalances that cause seizures.

Epilepsy is more common in children who also have **cognitive** deficits. Some researchers have suggested that seizure disorder is more common when the child has shown a regression or loss of skills. There are different types and subtypes of seizures and a child with autism may experience more than one type. The easiest to recognize are large “grand mal” (or **tonic-clonic**) seizures. Others include “petit mal” (or **absence**) seizures and **subclinical seizures**, which may only be apparent in an **EEG** (electroencephalogram). It is not clear whether subclinical seizures have effects on language, cognition and behavior. The seizures associated with autism usually start either early in childhood or during adolescence, but may occur at any time. If you are concerned that your child may be having seizures, you should see a neurologist. The neurologist may order tests that may include an **EEG**, an **MRI** (Magnetic Resonance Imaging), a **CT** (Computed Axial Tomography) and a **CBC** (Complete Blood Count). Children and adults with epilepsy are typically treated with **anticonvulsants** or seizure medicines to reduce or eliminate occurrences. If your child has epilepsy, you will work closely with a neurologist to find the medicine (or combination of medicines) that works the best with the fewest side effects and to learn the best ways to ensure your child’s safety during a seizure.

You can find more information about autism and epilepsy at autismspeaks.org/family-services/epilepsy.



Genetic disorders

Some children with autism have an identifiable genetic condition that affects brain development. These genetic disorders include Fragile X syndrome, Angelman syndrome, tuberous sclerosis, chromosome 15 duplication syndrome and other single-gene and chromosomal disorders. While further study is needed, single gene disorders appear to affect 15 to 20% of those with ASD. Some of these syndromes have characteristic features or family histories, the presence of which may prompt your doctor to refer your child to a geneticist or neurologist for further testing. The results can help increase awareness of associated medical issues and guide treatment and life planning.