



OptumHealthSM
Behavioral Solutions

Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

April 2009

Families Touched by Autism

Families living with autism face challenges that are difficult, but not impossible. With the right services and support — and continued advocacy on the part of loved ones — people with autism can live fulfilling lives.

Symptoms

Autism is a developmental disability that affects a person's ability to communicate. Both children and adults with autism typically show difficulties in verbal and nonverbal communication, social interactions, and leisure or play activities. It's a spectrum disorder. Not everyone has the same symptoms or displays the same behaviors or skills.

The first signs of the condition often appear before

age 3. As a child grows, symptoms may become more pronounced. Here are some signs to look for if you suspect your child may have autism:

- Lack of or delay in spoken language
- Repetitive use of language and/or motor mannerisms (e.g., hand-flapping, twirling objects)
- Little or no eye contact
- Lack of interest in peer relationships
- Lack of spontaneous or make-believe play
- Persistent fixation on parts of objects

Keep in mind that symptoms don't always mean your child has autism. And, symptoms can vary widely from child to child. If you're concerned about your child's behavior, contact your doctor for an exam.

Treatment

Autism is treatable. Studies show that, depending on the severity of the condition, early diagnosis and intervention can lead to significantly improved outcomes. Unfortunately, there are no medical tests to diagnose autism. Your doctor will examine and monitor your child's communication, behavior and developmental levels to determine if he or she has autism and to what degree.

Treatment varies from person to person. In general, treatment for those with autism is tailored to their specific needs. This may include:

- Speech, physical, occupational and music therapies
- Medication

When a Sibling Has Autism

Brothers and sisters of children with autism are affected in many ways. They may experience emotions including:

- Embarrassment around peers
- Shame for having negative feelings about their sibling with autism
- Jealousy of the amount of time parents spend with the sibling
- Frustration over trying to engage with their sibling
- Concern for the parents
- Fear of responsibility for the sibling later in life

Parents are the best resource to help siblings cope. Start by talking about autism. Base the information on the children's age and ability to understand. There also are sibling support groups available to help children learn about and cope with autism.

Whenever possible, spend time alone with each sibling. Give your undivided attention, and make sure he or she feels special. Children who understand autism and know they have your support and love will adapt more easily to having a sibling with autism.

Upcoming Articles

May 2009

Combat-Related Stress Disorders

June 2009

Family Safety Tips

Continued on [Page 2](#) »

- Hearing or vision therapy
- Behavioral and educational therapies

The earlier children begin treatment, the better the results. Special education programs exist, even for infants. These programs are tailored to a child's individual needs and teach children to

communicate and interact with others. It's also important to work with your doctor.

There is a wealth of information available through professional organizations such as the Autism Society of America and Autism Speaks. Also, be sure to take advantage of resources in your community.

Compassion, knowledge and support can help provide a better quality of life for your loved ones with autism.

OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions is here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.



Taking Care of Yourself

When you spend so much time caring for a loved one, it's common to forget about your own health and well-being. Here are some tips that can help you care for yourself:

- **Reduce stress.** Learn and practice stress management techniques such as deep breathing, meditation or yoga. Exercise also can help decrease stress and ease tension.
- **Be realistic.** Set reasonable goals for your caregiving abilities. Place limits on the amount of care you can provide. And, stick to them.
- **Ask for help.** Don't feel embarrassed or guilty if you need help. Family and friends may be able to assist with chores, errands or financial matters. Check out respite care resources — such as



home health aides or adult day-care centers — if you need relief for a short period of time.

- **Visit a friend.** Spending time with friends can help you relax — and even have some fun. See a movie. Go out to dinner or go for a walk.
- **Join a support group.** You may find that a support group is a good way to cope with your feelings. You'll have a chance to share your joys

and frustrations. And, you may get caregiving tips from others in similar situations.

- **Pay attention to your health.** Do you have an ache that won't go away? Are you very tired or stressed? It's important to maintain your health. See your doctor on a regular basis.
- **Remember to take care of yourself.** Get plenty of sleep, exercise regularly and eat healthfully.

Resources

OptumHealth Behavioral Solutions

Ask your HR representative for your access code and toll-free number.

www.liveandworkwell.com

Use the search phrase "autism" to learn more about treating the condition and making your home safe for a child with autism.

Use the search phrase "caregiver" to learn more about managing caregiver stress and depression, creating an emergency information form and finding camps for children with special needs.

The information and therapeutic approaches in this article are provided for educational purposes only and are not meant to be used in place of professional clinical consultations for individual health needs. Certain treatments may not be covered in some benefit plans. Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services.

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