Autism in one page

What it is

What is autism?

Autism is a lifelong difference in how a person communicates, connects with others and takes in sound, light and touch. The ABS counted 1.1 per cent of Australians as autistic in 2022. A trained clinician, such as a psychologist or psychiatrist, diagnoses it.

- Autism is lifelong, from early childhood on
- It shapes how you communicate and connect
- Strong reactions to noise or crowds are common

The signs

What are the signs of autism?

The signs of autism sit in two groups: differences in social communication, and repetitive behaviours or narrow, deep interests. Many autistic people also react strongly to noise, light or crowds. Signs usually start in infancy, but some people are not noticed until adulthood.

- Social signs and repetitive signs come together
- Strong reactions to noise or light are common
- Taking words literally is a frequent sign

How a diagnosis happens

How do I get an autism assessment?

You get an autism assessment in Australia through a GP or a psychologist, who guides you through a Comprehensive Needs Assessment and then a Diagnostic Evaluation. You do not need a paediatrician, a psychologist and a speech pathologist all at once: Australia's national guideline lets one suitably qualified practitioner lead the diagnosis, with input from at least one other person.

- Assessment follows four clear steps
- One practitioner can lead the diagnosis
- Team evaluations for complex situations

Treatment

What supports actually help autistic people?

The supports that help most are not one branded therapy, but ones that fit the person: evidence-based, neurodiversity-affirming, and built around what an autistic person and their family actually want. Australia's national guideline, approved by the NHMRC in December 2022, sets out 84 recommendations rather than naming a single approach for everyone, and says no fixed number of therapy hours works for everyone.

- No single support works for every autistic person

Medication

Is there a medication for autism?

No, there is no medicine that treats autism itself; Australia's national guideline puts medication out of scope, and NICE says do not use antipsychotics, antidepressants or anticonvulsants for its core features. Medicine is sometimes used for a specific problem alongside autism, such as severe irritability or a sleep problem, reviewed within weeks and stopped if it is not clearly helping.

Who diagnoses and who prescribes

Who can diagnose autism in Australia?

In Australia, one suitably qualified practitioner can diagnose autism: a doctor with specialist registration in paediatrics, psychiatry or neurology, a doctor with at least six years of relevant experience, or a psychologist with an endorsement in clinical, clinical neuro, or educational and developmental psychology. They diagnose with input from at least one other practitioner, not always a full team.

Some of this differs by state and territory. See the pages on your state at haihealth.au/blog/autism.

In danger? Call 000. Lifeline 13 11 14, text 0477 13 11 14, or chat online.

Suicide Call Back Service 1300 659 467. Free counselling by phone or video, any hour.

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