Questions to Ask Your Pediatrician About Autism

P. Gail Williams, M.D.
Associate Professor of Pediatrics
University of Louisville
Overview

* Questions to ask your pediatrician when you suspect the diagnosis
* Questions to ask your pediatrician once the diagnosis is made
When You Suspect the Diagnosis

* What are the signs of autism?
  * Communication impairments
  * Social skills deficits
  * Limited range of interests and activities
Communication in Young Children with Autism

- Frequently ignore language
- Deficits in nonverbal communication (eye gaze, pointing and gesturing, facial expression, etc.)
- Echolalia
- Impairments in receptive and expressive language
- Language regression in 1/3 of cases
Social Interaction in Young Children with Autism

- “Off in his own world”
- Lack of joint attention, shared enjoyment
- Difficult to engage in interactive play
- Social deficits often most evident with same age peers
Range of Activities in Young Children with Autism

- Minimal or atypical toy play
- Strong preoccupations
- Perseverative activities or speech
- Insistence on routine, rituals
- Abnormal response to sensory input
First Signs
Can we screen for autism?

The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended specific autism screening at 18 and 24 month well child checks.

Many screening tools are available

Perhaps the most widely used is M-CHAT

Readily available and sensitive
What services are available?

- First Steps provides services for any child with developmental disabilities below the age of 3
- Includes speech therapy, occupational therapy, developmental intervention, behavior interventions
- The public school system provides preschool and therapy services after age 3
- Don’t wait to start services
How can I get definitive diagnosis?

- Facilities throughout the state can provide evaluations; most are in academic centers
- Evaluation should include thorough history, behavioral observations, developmental measures, autism diagnostic tool
- Medical evaluation also helpful
Once the Diagnosis is Made

What causes autism?

- Etiology still unknown
- Neurobiologic disorder due to differences in brain development
- Strong genetic component
- Possible environmental factors
How common is autism?

- Current research indicates prevalence rate of 1 in 88
- Dramatic increase in prevalence over last 20 to 30 years
- In part, due to increased awareness, better diagnostic tools, increased services, etc.
Once the Diagnosis is Made

- What are the risks for having a second child with autism?
  
  * Previously quoted as 3 to 8%
  * Recent study of siblings of children with autism indicated recurrence risk of nearly 19%
Once the Diagnosis is Made

* Should any medical tests be done?

* Autism is associated with other medical and genetic conditions in 10 to 15% of cases

* Genetic testing recommended to include Fragile X DNA testing, microarray chromosome analysis

* Sleep deprived EEG if history of language regression

* Consider MRI of brain


Medical Tests

- **Fragile X Syndrome**
  - **Causes:** Trinucleotide repeat in the FMR-1 gene on the X chromosome
  - **Appearance:** Portion of chromosome X is dangling by a thread

Once the Diagnosis is Made

- Are there any medical conditions more common in autism?

- Intellectual disability is identified in approximately 50% of children with autism

- Seizures are present in approximately one-third of children with autism
Once the diagnosis is made

- What about vaccinations and autism?

- First concerns were raised about measles vaccine and autism
- Initial work discredited; numerous studies showed no relationship between autism and measles vaccine
- Later concern about thimerosol and autism
- Studies showed no relationship; no longer used as preservative in vaccines
What about sleep?

- Many children with ASD have sleep problems
- Disruption in Circadian rhythms
- Difficulty falling and staying asleep, waking early
- Behavioral interventions first line
- Melatonin may be helpful
Once diagnosis is made

- What about eating habits?
  - Often very limited food repertoires
  - Can be based on sensory issues
  - Behavioral approach often very effective
  - Systematic approach to introducing new foods
  - Provide rewards and exposure, not trying to force
Once the Diagnosis is Made

* What is the treatment for autism?
  * Primarily educational and behavioral
  * 24 evidence based practices
  * Speech therapy
  * Occupational therapy
  * Social skills training
Once the diagnosis is made

* What about behavioral problems associated with autism?
  * Behavioral problems common
  * Attention problems and hyperactivity
  * Anxiety and depression
  * Marked irritability with mood lability, aggression, self-injurious behavior
Once the diagnosis is made

- What role does medication have in the treatment of autism?
- Medication does not address core symptoms of autism
- Adjunctive to help with associated behavior problems that interfere with home, school and community function
Once the diagnosis is made

- What medications are used to treat these behavioral problems?
  - Medications for ADHD: stimulants, nonstimulants
  - Medications for depression/anxiety: SSRI’s
  - Medications for severe irritability: atypical antipsychotics
Once the diagnosis is made

- What should I ask before starting medication?
  - What behaviors are being targeted by the medication?
  - What side effects are possible?
  - What monitoring should be done?
  - How will we measure progress on medication?
Once the diagnosis is made

* What about alternative biomedical interventions?

* Wide variety available, including dietary changes, vitamins, and supplements
* Others: hyperbaric oxygen, chelation therapy
* Little research available
Once the diagnosis is made

- What should I consider if I want to try biomedical interventions?
  - Potential benefits
  - Potential side effects
  - Expense
  - Role in overall program
  - Evidence supporting intervention
Once the diagnosis is made

- What can I expect in the future?
  - Progress, but variable in rate
  - Factors in prognosis: intelligence, temperament, language, early intervention
  - Access services and supports to optimize child’s potential, but realize that each child’s potential is different
Once the Diagnosis is Made

* Where do I go from here?

* Educate yourself about autism
* Access appropriate educational and behavioral services
* Become an advocate for your child
* Resources: KATC Family Guide, AAP, Autism Speaks, CDC, local family support groups