

Raising awareness of epilepsy

The Health Column

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Autism is a lifelong developmental condition that affects how people see their environment and relate to others. It is characterised by differences in social communication and behavioural patterns. People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can often have difficulty understanding other people's feelings, and can therefore say the wrong thing. They may also not use gestures and body language in the same way that other people do. There is a wide variation or spectrum in how people are affected and what they may feel and show.

People with autism spectrum disorder can also prefer routines and things happening in a certain way, such as taking the same route to school or to the shops, or they may line up toys in a particular order. If there is a change in routine without warning or something is out of place this may upset them. People with autism spectrum disorder may also have increased sensitivity to their environment, and may find loud noises or bright lights upsetting. They often have certain interests in particular topics, and can have extensive knowledge in their area of special interest. They can also have an impressive memory for detail.

There has been an increase in the number of cases of autism diagnosed in Australia, and 1 in 100 Australian children have autism. It has been suggested that the increase is from increased awareness of the early signs of autism as well as diagnostic criteria that is more sensitive. A higher incidence of autism spectrum disorder is found in males than females. The cause of autism spectrum disorder is unknown, however research suggests biological or neurological differences in the brain may begin during pregnancy or shortly after birth. Genetics may play a role in many (but not all) instances.

While there is no cure for autism spectrum disorder, early interventions, therapy and education delivered by appropriate professionals with expertise in autism spectrum disorder can make a large difference. These interventions can assist with reducing some of the challenges, enhancing skill development and improving quality of life.

People with autism spectrum disorder can have difficulty talking to people and making friends, however they still have the same emotions as other people and love having friends, even if it is hard. Children with autism may have difficulty talking to you, understanding non-verbal communication (e.g. eye contact, facial expressions and gestures), and socialising with other



people. To support communication, the following could be tried:

- Speak less, simplify your language and use key words.
- Talk about one idea at a time, and in the order that they will happen.
- Use simple and natural gestures, pictures and objects to support what you are talking about.
- Talk slowly and use pauses so that information can be processed.
- Use positive statements, as it is easier to understand what to do rather than what not to do (e.g. 'we walk inside' rather than 'do not run').
- When providing instructions, use statements rather than questions.

The ninth annual World Autism Awareness Day is on Sunday, 2nd of April, 2017. Every year, autism organisations around the world celebrate this day through fundraising and events to raise awareness. This year, Autism Spectrum Australia (Aspect) invites people to be involved in World Autism Awareness Day through Walk for Autism. Challenge yourself by walking 10,000 steps each day for 8 days (from 2-9 April), and help raise funds to change the lives of people on the autism spectrum. Further information on Walk for Autism, as well as other ways to be involved to support people with autism and their families, is available at:

www.autismspectrum.org.au/getinvolved .

Your local pharmacy is your health destination, and is here to assist you with your everyday health needs. Pharmacies that provide the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia's Self Care health information can provide Self Care Fact Cards on a wide variety of health topics. The Fact Card *Carer Support* may provide useful information to support those caring for people with autism spectrum disorder. Other fact cards may also be relevant and helpful depending on your individual situation – ask your pharmacist.

For the nearest Self Care pharmacy location phone the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia on 1300 369 772, or go to www.psa.org.au/selfcare, then click 'Find a *Self Care pharmacy* near you'.