Understanding Co-Occurring Conditions in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

A Guide for Families and Caregivers

> ***People with autism are more likely to experience certain Co-Occurring Conditions than the general population.***

A co-occurring condition is a medical, mental health, or developmental disorder that exists alongside another primary diagnosis. These conditions, which may not always be immediately apparent, can affect an individual's quality of life and may complicate the diagnosis and treatment of autism.

Understanding these potential health concerns is important for families and caregivers to have informed conversations with healthcare providers.

Common Co-Occurring Conditions in Autism

Anxiety/Depression

- May affect up to 84% of people with autism.
- May manifest as generalized anxiety, social anxiety, obsessive-compulsive behaviors, fears, and phobias.
- Symptoms include irritability, repetitive behaviors, and sleep or appetite disturbances.
- Up to 26% of people with autism experience depression.
- Symptoms overlap with autism (e.g., social withdrawal, self-injury, lack of eye contact).

★ **TIP: Depression may be harder to detect due to communication differences. Connect with a qualified professional (psychologist, psychiatrist, developmental specialist) to gather information across multiple settings and informants.**

Epilepsy

- Affects 35% of people with autism (compared to 1% in the general population).
- Seizures may be subtle, such as staring spells or repetitive behaviors.

★ **TIP: Work with a neurologist to evaluate seizures, particularly during adolescence.**

Gastrointestinal (GI) Disorders

- Children with autism are 4x more likely to have GI issues (e.g., constipation, diarrhea, GERD).
- Symptoms include anxiety, irritability, and sleep disturbances.

★ **TIP: Be mindful of changes in bowel habits or persistent or severe issues and and seek the help of a gastroenterologist if needed.**

Sleep Disorders

- Up to 80% of children with autism have sleep problems (e.g., trouble falling asleep, waking frequently).
- Causes may include GI distress, medication side effects, or sensory differences.

★ **TIP: Work with a sleep specialist to address chronic sleep disruptions.**

Dental Concerns

- People with autism may face challenges like sensory differences, difficulty with oral hygiene, bruxism (teeth grinding), and an increased risk of cavities or gum disease.
- Dental pain can present as a headache, change in behavior or even self-injury.

★ **TIP: Talk to a dentist experienced in autism for tailored care. Ask your occupational therapist for sensory techniques that may be helpful as well.**

Why Identification of Co-Occurring Conditions is Important

Undiagnosed Co-Occurring Conditions can lead to chronic discomfort or pain, which may worsen over time.

These issues may contribute to behavioral or emotional challenges that can be misinterpreted as part of autism but could be the result of an underlying medical concern. Early diagnosis and treatment can greatly improve quality of life.

What You Can Do

- **Observe changes:** Pay attention to any signs of discomfort, pain, or changes in behavior.
- **Consult with specialists:** Work with your physician or a specialist (such as a gastroenterologist or neurologist) to rule out co-occurring conditions.
- **Advocate for comprehensive care:** Make sure all potential medical issues are discussed when planning treatment for autism.

Consult Your Healthcare Provider

If you suspect you or your loved one may be experiencing one of these conditions, discuss it with your physician to ensure a comprehensive evaluation and treatment plan. Asking questions and learning about your options is an important first step in finding the support to meet your family's needs.