

Guidelines for health practitioners



Guidance

Adapting consultations



Some autistic people might find self-advocacy difficult and may agree to something just to end a difficult interaction. If their visits become too stressful, they might avoid returning. By understanding this, GPs and other healthcare practitioners can adjust their consultations to better accommodate these patients.

Service-wide considerations

Ensure that any autism diagnostic report is added to medical records.

Use a 'reasonable adjustments digital flag' on a patient's health record to signal they may need reasonable adjustments.

Make the waiting experience less overwhelming, for example:

- provide appointments at the beginning or end of the day
- offer a quiet waiting area.

Manage the environment, think about keeping:

- lighting low
- noise to a minimum
- touch to a minimum.

Seeing the same GP/health practitioner in the same consulting room can provide structure and routine to appointments.

Allow more time. Offer autistic people double appointments.

Provide fidget toys to help patients manage anxiety.

GPs and health practitioners should understand 'masking' behaviours, and be aware that masking may mean they do not see the full extent of their patient's distress.

Provide visual resources, booklets or videos to help prepare autistic people for appointments.

Provide easy-read appointment letters and ensure that service websites are accessible.

Provide autism awareness training to ensure staff can understand and support autistic people, and their families, effectively.

Appointments/consultations

Establish a preferred method of communication and:

- use clear, concise and precise language
- allow sufficient time to process questions
- recognise that visual aids and scales can be helpful.

To check understanding, ask patients to repeat what has been discussed during the consultation.

Write down the main points of the meeting for the autistic person to take away with them.

Be proactive in asking autistic patients if they are coping or if they need help.

If appointments are likely to be delayed, keep patients informed.

Tell autistic patients that it was okay for them to come and see you, and that it is okay for them to come back and see you again if they need to.

Encourage patients to use a **health and care passport**.

Sensory-friendly environments



Healthcare services can create a more supportive environment for autistic patients by:

- raising awareness of autistic sensory needs among staff by providing training on autism and sensory challenges
- actively seeking feedback from autistic patients and using this to help improve practices.

Creating a sensory-friendly clinical setting and reducing barriers to accessing healthcare for autistic patients can significantly improve their healthcare experience. For example, it can:

- reduce stress and anxiety and help minimise sensory overload, which can be overwhelming for autistic individuals
- improve access to healthcare by accommodating sensory sensitivities, which can help alleviate fear of discomfort
- provide a supportive and calming environment that improves levels of patient satisfaction.

Sensory considerations

Lighting	Noise control
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide soft lights or natural light where possible.• Avoid flickering lights as this can be very distressing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Offer designated quiet areas or rooms where patients can wait if they find the main area too noisy.• If music is played, ensure it is soft and calming. Avoid loud or sudden noises.
Furniture and layout	Visual environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide comfortable seating options, including chairs with armrests and cushions.• Arrange furniture to create an uncluttered environment, allowing for easy movement.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use neutral and calming colours for walls and furniture. Avoid bright, contrasting colours.• Keep decorations simple and minimal to avoid visual clutter.
Clear signage	Staff training
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use clear, simple signs with both text and symbols to help with navigation.• Ensure the layout is consistent and easy to understand.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Train staff to recognise sensory sensitivities and respond appropriately.• Encourage staff to communicate calmly and clearly, and to be patient with sensory-sensitive individuals.

Resources

- NHS England - Resources to improve the sensory environment for autistic people
- [Sensory-friendly resource pack](#)
- www.boingboing.org.uk/more_than_words/

Communication



Healthcare practitioners should use clear and simple language when communicating with autistic patients. They should ask specific questions and give extra time for responses. Creating a calm environment and using visual aids can help reduce anxiety. These practices are important because they make healthcare more accessible and comfortable for autistic individuals, leading to better care and outcomes.

Healthcare professionals should understand the different ways in which autistic sensory experiences can affect communication in healthcare settings. For example, patients could present as feeling overwhelmed and have reduced ability to communicate their health issues or needs.

Sensory differences may include impaired interoception (sense of the internal state of the body) which can impact an individual's ability to identify and explain their pain, discomfort or other symptoms.

Using closed questions can help avoid confusion; closed questions often have straightforward answers which makes them easier to process and respond to. Using closed questions can be helpful when gathering precise information from autistic people in clinical settings, for example:

Avoid saying...

Do say...

Medical history:

"Can you tell me about any previous medical conditions or surgeries you've had?"

"Have you ever been hospitalised for any reason?"

"Do you have any allergies?"

"Have you ever had surgery?"

"Are you currently taking any medications?"

Symptoms:

"Can you describe the pain you're experiencing?"

"How have your symptoms changed over time?"

"Are you experiencing any pain?"

"Do you have a fever?"

"Have you noticed any swelling?"

Lifestyle and habits:

"What does a typical day look like for you?"

"Can you describe your diet and exercise routine?"

"Do you smoke?"

"Do you exercise regularly?"

"Do you consume alcohol?"

General health:

"Can you tell me more about how you've been feeling lately?"

"What brings you in today?"

"Have you had your flu jab this year?"

"Do you have any chronic conditions?"

"Have you been tested for diabetes?"

Communication



Resources

- ***More than words: Supporting effective communication with autistic people in healthcare settings***

This report by NHS England provides comprehensive guidelines on how to communicate effectively with autistic patients. It emphasises the importance of clear, concise communication and understanding the unique needs of autistic patients.

Further information



Here are some valuable resources for health practitioners to support autistic patients:

NHS health and care passports:

Health and care passports: are designed to be a quick and easy way to give health and social care professionals more information about you to help them provide the right care and treatment.

My health passport: is a resource for autistic people who might need hospital treatment. The passport is designed to help autistic people to communicate their needs to doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals.

NHS England:

The NHS provides a **clinical guide** for frontline staff to support the management of patients with learning disabilities and autism. This guide includes advice on day-to-day care and emphasises the importance of healthcare passports.

Useful **autism training resources** collated in one place.

National Autistic Society:

In-depth **advice and guidance** about autism and the challenges autistic people and their families face. Topics include what is autism, diagnosis, communication, mental health, education and more.

Mind:

A **website** that shares a lot of relevant information, including on mental health and useful contact details for help and support with a range of issues such as employment, equality and social care.

Skills for Health:

Core capabilities framework for supporting autistic people

**For further support to enhance your practise please visit
our Autism Accreditation pages to find out more about our
Autism Inclusive Award for health practitioners**

