

Underlying Causes and Associated Conditions

Autistic continuum disorders can be caused by a variety of conditions that affect brain development and that occur before, during or after birth. They include, for example, maternal rubella, tuberosclerosis, lack of oxygen at birth, encephalitis complicating a childhood illness such as measles or whooping cough. A genetic trait is important in some cases. As yet, for most individuals with an autistic condition, it is not possible to specify the exact cause. However, as research progresses, more causes come to light. It is hoped that, eventually, in every case both the original cause and the essential brain pathology will be identified.

As previously emphasised, autistic conditions can occur in association with any other physical or psychological disability. It is not possible to exclude autism just because an individual has, for example, cerebral palsy, a hearing or visual impairment, Down's syndrome, or other chromosomal abnormality. Similarly, autistic chromosome disorders can and often do co-exist with aphasia, dyslexia, semantic-pragmatic disorder, or any other type of specific or general learning disability. None of these conditions can 'explain away' autistic behaviour. If an autistic disorder is present in addition to some other disability, it should be recognised as it has important implications for treatment and prognosis.

In addition, many individuals, thought to be up to one third, have an underlying seizure disorder which may require treatment with appropriate anti-convulsants.