

Advocating support for autism awareness and early intervention

The Department of Health has urged families and communities to support individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), also known as autism, to thrive and reach their full potential, and to refrain from discriminating against them.



Source: [Pexels](#)

This, as South Africa joins the global community to increase awareness about autism and how communities can support autistic people.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), about one in every 100 children globally has autism.

In South Africa, the Department of Health said local studies have found the prevalence of autism to be between 0.08% and 2%.

“This condition is mainly found to be more prevalent in males than females,” the department said.

Autism can be a life-long condition, but according to the department, through appropriate and tailored support, children and adults with autism can make significant progress and live fulfilling lives.

“Autistic individuals, as well as their parents and caregivers, often face many challenges, but these do not have to define

them because they have the same health needs and rights as the general population. They may, in addition, have specific healthcare needs related to autism or other co-occurring conditions requiring attention, support and care," the department said.

The department believes that all people, including those with autism, have the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.

Addressing stigma and enhancing support

"However, autistic people are often subjected to stigma and discrimination, including unjust deprivation of care, education, and opportunities to engage and participate in their communities," the department said.

People with ASD have unique physical, social, mental healthcare and educational needs because of their conditions.

This is the reason the department is of the view that this requires strong collaborative efforts with other government departments such as Basic Education and Social Development for the provision of an all-inclusive basket of services for early detection and intervention of ASD to improve overall health outcomes and lessen long-term suffering and costs of care.



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Developmental milestone screening is one of the key interventions to detect disorders like ASD to facilitate early interventions, as studies have shown that the median age of diagnosis of these conditions is between 18 to 24 months.

Early autism detection

In South Africa, the Road to Health Booklet or clinic card issued to all children at birth helps parents monitor each child's health and development until the age of five.

This also assists in early identification and intervention when a child's development is not in line with the expected developmental milestones.

Early diagnosis and intervention of autism, the department said, can significantly impact the child's development and help families understand their child's strengths and challenges and create a personalised treatment and support plan.

Parents are encouraged to familiarise themselves with the educational information contained in the clinic card.

Although there is no cure for autism spectrum disorders, some medications are used to help people with ASD function better by treating co-occurring symptoms such as high energy levels, inability to focus, or self-harming behaviour, including head banging or hand biting.

Treatment can also help manage co-occurring mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, and physical conditions such as seizures and sleep problems.

"If you suspect that you or your family member or child may have autism spectrum disorder, visit your nearest health care facility or provider for screening and assessment to enable them to provide the necessary interventions, or refer where necessary," the department advised.

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