



## **AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS**

### **GENERAL FACT SHEET**

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are developmental disabilities that can impair a person's ability to communicate and relate to others. The thinking and learning abilities of people with autism can vary greatly – ranging from gifted to severely challenged. Autism typically presents before the age of 3 and lasts throughout a person's life.

ASD includes autistic disorders, pervasive developmental disorders and Asperger syndrome. These conditions all have some of the same symptoms but differ in terms of when the symptoms start, how severe they are and the exact nature of the symptoms.

The Centers for Disease Control estimate autism affects nearly seven out of every 1,000 children nationally. In California, the rate of those diagnosed with autism has more than quadrupled – from 7,487 cases in 1996 to 32,809 in 2006, according to the state Department of Developmental Services.

Research into causes and treatments for autism is ongoing. At this point, though, there is no known cause for autism and no known cure. There are many emerging services.

#### **California Has a Clearly Defined System of Medical and Educational Services for Autism**

- Californians are fortunate to have a clearly defined system of medical and educational services provided by a partnership of the state's health plans, public schools and state-funded local providers, known as regional centers. In this system:
  - Regional centers provide assessments and evaluations and coordinate a variety of educational services and everyday life skills training for individuals with autism and their families.
  - Public schools are responsible for providing educational services to students with autism.
  - California health plans provide health care coverage for individuals with autism and their families.

#### **Regional Centers Provide Assessments and Coordinate Educational and Life Skills Training**

- The California Department of Developmental Services provides various services to Californians with autism through contracts with 21 nonprofit private organizations, known as "regional centers." The regional centers actually provide the services or contract with others to provide them.
- Regional centers may only purchase services when no other private or public funding source is available. Among the services available through the regional centers are diagnosis and assessment, information and referral, early intervention programs, parent skills training, counseling, family support, speech therapy and other types of behavioral modification therapy and everyday life skills training, known as applied behavior analysis.
- Up to age 3, any child at risk of having a developmental disability or who has a developmental delay may qualify for services through the regional centers. After age 3, these services are limited. Only those who have a developmental disability that is expected to continue indefinitely and present a significant impairment can qualify for services through the regional centers.

- With autism, eligibility for assistance through the regional centers after the age of 3 requires a specific diagnosis of autism. Some types of ASD, such as Asperger syndrome, won't qualify for services through the regional centers after the age of 3.

### **Public Schools Are Responsible for Educational Services from age 3 to 19**

- From the age of 3 through 19, the public schools are responsible for educating all students with special needs, including autism.
- Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, students with autism must have an individualized education plan that requires input from teachers, parents and others about appropriate education strategies for the child. As much as possible, pupils with autism are to be educated with students who are not disabled.
- For pupils with autism who need additional educational services, the schools either provide those services or contract with others for those services. The services vary and may include speech, language and occupational therapy, transportation, adaptive physical education, classroom aides and behavioral intervention.

### **Health Plans Provide Health Care Coverage from Birth through Adulthood**

- From birth through adulthood, California health plans provide comprehensive coverage for autism-related medical services for individuals with autism and their families, as they do for other developmental disabilities and mental health disorders. These medical services include therapies provided by licensed or certificated specialists. Coverage varies among the plans but usually includes:
  - Evaluation and assessment of autism
  - Medication
  - Speech therapy
  - Physical therapy
  - Occupational therapy
  - Rehabilitative therapy
  - Psychotherapy for the individual
  - Psychotherapy for the family
- California leads the nation in the services it provides to individuals with autism and to their families. Rapid growth in autism diagnoses has put a strain on those services, and California's health plans stand ready to engage in a thoughtful discussion about a system of care that's easy for families to navigate, lays out clear roles and responsibilities for all involved and ensures medical coverage for all our members.

*CAHP is a statewide trade association representing 39 full-service health plans. Through legislative advocacy, education and collaboration with other member organizations, CAHP works to sustain a strong environment in which our member plans can provide access to products that offer choice and flexibility to the more than 24 million members they serve. For more information, please visit [www.calhealthplans.org](http://www.calhealthplans.org) or call (916) 552-2910.*

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