

AUTISM: A GUIDE FOR DENTISTS

Autism is a developmental disorder which affects the way in which an individual communicates and relates to others.

This guide overviews the difficulties that individuals with autism have in accessing dental treatment and advice on how to adapt practice to support individuals with autism.

Many individuals with autism find meeting new people, visiting new places or undertaking new activities very stressful. As visiting the dentist is not a frequent activity, the change to usual routine can in itself be difficult.

Unusual sensory responses can also add to the distress. Many individuals with autism avoid bright lights, loud noises and strong smells because they cause them distress but these are abundant in the dental surgery.



These issues alongside dislike of touch, difficulties understanding non verbal communication and problems with predicting others and 'reading between the lines' mean that visiting the dentist is an extremely stressful experience.

As the experience is so stressful many avoid visiting the dentist even when experiencing significant dental issues. This is a huge concern for parents who often unable to access advice and support around this issue. As a single bad experience could lead to the child refusing to attend further appointments, getting it right can have huge benefits for the child's future.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

By increasing your understanding and making small changes, you can make a big difference.

When you have a patient with autism you should:

- **BE CLEAR**
- **BE ACCEPTING**
- **BE PREDICTABLE**
- **BE SENSORY AWARE**

DEVELOPING FAMILIARITY

- If an individual has not visited you before or has not visited for a long time it will be really beneficial to allow them a visit to familiarise themselves with the staff and environment.
- During this visit the individual will benefit from seeing staff, rooms and equipment. If willing they should be allowed to sit in the dental chair and experience it moving.



APPOINTMENTS

- Adults with autism find making appointments difficult and frequently feel anxious about using the telephone. Be understanding offer an email or online booking system.
- Direct the individual to a quieter, less busy place to wait as children and adults with autism find busy areas difficult.
- Allocate the first appointment of the day when there are less people, less noise and delays are less likely.
- If there is a delay with the appointment time let the individual know how long they will be waiting as soon as possible.
- Check for signs of anxiety such as handwringing, rocking or pacing. If observed provide information about waiting times and what to expect.

COMMUNICATION AND UNDERSTANDING

Individuals with autism have impairments in social communication and interaction. You should therefore:

- Avoid meaningless social chit chat, stick to facts.
- Work with a parent or carer to help your communication.
- Avoid figurative language, idiom and metaphor are confusing.
- Say what you mean, say "sit on the chair" rather than "hop on".
- Be specific and avoid ambiguous language such as frequently, often, sometimes.
- Explain the purpose and expectation of your interaction, be clear about whether you are providing information or asking for information.
- Do not rely on facial expression, body language, eye contact or tone of voice to convey or emphasise a point.
- Be clear and concise, say what you mean and mean what you say.
- Describe your intentions, and where appropriate demonstrate. Don't assume that gestures of your intentions (e.g. handing glasses to an individual to indicate you want them to wear them) will be recognised.
- Avoid talking whilst wearing a mask if possible.





PAIN

Due to sensory processing issues, individuals with autism may have an increased or decreased response to pain.

You should be aware that:

- Some individuals may not feel much pain with conditions that would cause severe pain in others, ensure that this is taken into account.
- Some individuals may feel increased level of pain, and may even find gentle touch painful.
- Individuals with autism may not respond to anaesthetic in the same way as those without autism.



ASSESSMENT AND TREATMENT

- Difficulties with social imagination and interaction mean that individuals do not respond well to stress management techniques such as distraction or visualisation. Being clear and predictable is more effective.
- Be aware that individuals with autism often find it difficult to predict hypothetical outcomes. They therefore may not recognise that moving during treatment could cause injury.
- Be clear about how they should indicate they want you to stop, and practice before start.
- Explain procedures clearly and concisely and explain each step before you commence.
- Ensure there are no surprises, demonstrate equipment before using them so the individual is aware of the noise and sensation.
- Sensory issues mean that sensations from equipment are heightened, proceed slowly and provide plenty of breaks.
- Bright lights can cause distress, provide darkened glasses.
- Be aware of responses to smell and taste, use a mild rinse or water.
- Autism is often found alongside other conditions such as ADHD, which may cause additional difficulties with sitting for long periods and concentration.

FOLLOW UP

Follow up instructions should be adapted for individuals with autism:

- Be clear and concise and explain expectations.
- Do not use ambiguous language.
- Give parameters for when they should return rather than saying 'any problems call us'.
- Give all instructions in visual format, clear bullet points or diagrams.
- Ensure the individual is aware of further appointments, explain what they should do in response to letters for future appointments.

IF IN DOUBT

- Both children and adults with autism find accessing dental treatment very difficult. It causes much stress and worry for them, and also for parents and carers. Because of this, many are unable to access or complete treatment. If in doubt, please refer for specialist help and support.



FURTHER INFORMATION



Some individuals may not want you to know they have autism. However, the Welsh Government funded 'Can you see me?' scheme allows individuals with autism to use a band, card or screensaver to show others that they have autism. The band does not say the individual has autism but instead displays the following logo:



**For further information email: ASDinfo@WLGA.gov.uk
or visit:**

