

Screening for Common Diagnoses in Autistic Individuals: A Healthcare Professional's Guide

Autistic individuals face higher risks for certain health conditions due to healthcare barriers, delayed diagnoses, and inequitable access to care. Early screening and proactive care can help prevent long-term health complications. This guide outlines key co-occurring conditions, their impacts, and screening strategies to improve healthcare outcomes.



Mental Health Conditions

- Prevalence: Anxiety (42%), depression (37%), and PTSD are significantly more common.
- Impacts: Undiagnosed conditions can intensify sensory, communication, and daily functioning challenges.

Screening Tips:

- Use Autism-informed tools like the Autism Spectrum Addendum (ASA).
- Assess for camouflaging behaviors with the [Camouflaging Autistic Traits Questionnaire \(CAT-Q\)](#).
- Avoid relying on outward expressions—ask directly about sensory or emotional stressors.



Gastrointestinal Disorders

- Prevalence: Up to 39% experience chronic constipation, diarrhea, or irritable bowel syndrome.
- Impacts: Digestive issues can affect mood, energy, and behavior.

Screening Tips:

- Ask about GI symptoms explicitly, particularly in nonverbal patients.
- Use visual aids or body maps to identify discomfort.
- Refer to gastroenterologists as needed.



Neurological Conditions

- Prevalence: Epilepsy affects 16–30% of Autistic individuals.
- Impacts: Undiagnosed seizures may be mistaken for behavioral symptoms, affecting neurological health.

Screening Tips:

- Watch for subtle signs like brief attention lapses or repetitive movements.



Cardiovascular and Metabolic Disorders

- Prevalence: Increased risk for diabetes, obesity, and hypertension.
- Impacts: Barriers to preventive care, dietary challenges, and sedentary habits contribute to these risks.

Screening Tips:

- Regularly monitor blood pressure, cholesterol, and glucose levels.
- Provide sensory-friendly screenings to ease anxiety.
- Offer guidance on accessible physical activity options.



Sensory and Immune System Disorders

- Prevalence: Sensory sensitivities are nearly universal; immune irregularities, such as autoimmune disorders, are more common.
- Impacts: Sensory issues can increase medical stress, and immune dysfunction may lead to chronic fatigue.

Screening Tips:

- Ask directly about pain, as responses may differ from neurotypical patients.
- Provide sensory supports like noise-canceling headphones and dim lighting.



Chronic Pain and Musculoskeletal Conditions

- Prevalence: Fibromyalgia and joint hypermobility are frequently reported.
- Impacts: Pain can impair mobility, intensify sensory challenges, and lower quality of life.

Screening Tips:

- Use nonverbal pain assessment tools.
- Ask about sleep and movement patterns, which may indicate chronic pain.



Sleep Disorders

- Prevalence: Up to 43% report insomnia, irregular sleep, or circadian rhythm disorders.
- Impacts: Poor sleep worsens anxiety, ADHD, and mood regulation.

Screening Tips:

- Ask about sleep routines and disturbances.
- Recommend behavioral sleep strategies or refer to specialists who accommodate sensory needs.



Dementia and Alzheimer's Disease

- Prevalence: Autistic adults, particularly those without intellectual disabilities, face higher risks of early-onset dementia.
- Impacts: Cognitive decline can increase communication barriers and reduce independence.

Screening Tips:

- Use cognitive assessments tailored to communication abilities.
- Monitor for changes in memory, habits, and social engagement.
- Connect patients with [Aging and Disability Resource Centers \(ADRCs\)](#).

By recognizing these common co-occurring conditions and implementing proactive screening strategies, healthcare professionals can support earlier interventions and reduce health disparities for Autistic individuals.