Autism, along with other neurodevelopmental disabilities, has been regarded as primarily a central nervous system disorder. Medical professionals have by enlarge ignored the various other disorders coexisting with autism, such as dysfunction of the gastrointestinal system. There is very strong evidence that children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) tend to suffer from a wide variety of gut symptoms and abnormal gut pathologies. Sometimes there may be severe gut problems that are neglected and not considered in routine ASD evaluations. The incidence of gut symptoms is much higher in ASD than in either typical development or other developmental disorders. The most frequent complaints are chronic constipation and/or diarrhoea, flatulence, abdominal discomfort/pain and distension.

A very strong recommendation from another study in the Journal of Pediatrics stated: “At a minimum, GI dysfunction in ASD warrants the adoption of a lower referral threshold by practitioners for evaluation and treatment by a gastroenterologist if an underlying problem is suspected. Children with ASD often present with limited verbal communication, and as a result, their symptom presentation may be unusual compared with that of their peers. For example, the emergence or exacerbation of problem behaviors, such as aggression, self-injury, sleep disturbance, or irritability, without clear environmental influence (ie, antecedents or consequences), may be the only indication of an underlying GI problem.”


Further a study in the Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology linked “GI issues with behaviour, showing that ASD children who have GI issues often experience extreme anxiety as well as regressions in behaviour and communication skills”.

“The side effects of the psychotropic drugs that are prescribed to ASD children may intensify their digestive issues.”

Check your child against the The Autism Gut and Behaviour Checklist over the page. See if your child may have undiagnosed gut issues contributing to difficult behaviour and poor treatment outcomes.
The Autism Gut and Behaviour Checklist

**Family History**
- Lactose or other food intolerances
- Food allergy
- Reflux
- Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS)
- Inflammatory bowel disease – e.g. ulcerative colitis, Crohn’s disease
- Problems swallowing, e.g. eosinophilic oesophagitis
- Gastritis or ulcers
- Coeliac disease
- Non-coeliac gluten sensitivity
- Eating disorders
- Other gastrointestinal issues: “sensitive stomach”, “need to watch what I eat”

**Past and Present Medical History**
- Constipation or diarrhoea as an infant
- Persistent colic
- Projectile vomiting
- Hard to settle after feeding
- Sleep issues in the past or currently
- On medication (e.g. antipsychotic, antidepressant)

**Physical Signs of Poor Gastrointestinal Health**
- Chronic constipation
- Loose stools / diarrhoea
- Alternating constipation and diarrhoea
- Malodorous stool
- Flatulence
- Straining
- Reflux or reflux medication
- Vomiting

**Behaviours That May Be Markers of Abdominal Pain or Discomfort in Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorders**
- Restricted eating
- Screaming
- Sobbing “for no apparent reason”
- Whining, moaning or groaning
- Facial grimacing
- Frequent clearing of throat, swallowing, tics, etc
- Teeth grinding
- Tapping behaviour: finger tapping on throat

**Less obvious behaviours associated with gut issues**
- Agitation: pacing, jumping up and down
- Unexplained increase in repetitive behaviours
- Self-injurious behaviours: biting, hits/slaps face, head banging, scratching, unexplained increase in self-injury
- Aggression: onset of, or increase in, aggressive behaviour
- Constant eating/drinking/swallowing (“grazing” behaviour)
- Mouthing behaviours: chewing on clothes (shirt sleeve cuff, neck of shirt, etc), pica
- Application of pressure to abdomen: leaning abdomen against or over furniture, pressing hands into abdomen, rubbing abdomen
- Any unusual posturing, which may appear as individual postures or in various combinations: jaw thrust, neck torsion, arching of back, odd arm positioning, rotational distortions of torso/trunk, sensitivity to being touched in abdominal area/ flinching

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**The Take Home Message For Parents**

*The more boxes that you have ticked for your child, the more likely it is that your child has an underlying gut issue that needs to be treated.*

*Treat your child’s gut issue and you may be surprised how quickly their behaviour improves, and the gains they make with other therapies.*