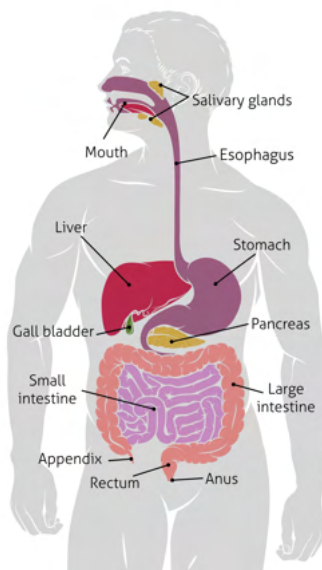


Beyond the Brain: Understanding the Physical Side of Autism

When most people think of autism, they picture behavioral differences or communication barriers. However, autism is a profoundly whole-body experience. Autistic individuals regularly experience a variety of co-occurring physical health conditions that can significantly impact how they feel and interact with the world every day.

Among the most common physical hurdles are gastrointestinal (GI) issues. Autistic individuals experience bowel conditions, chronic discomfort, and severe food allergies at rates significantly higher than the general population. Because communicating physical pain can be difficult—especially for children who are minimally verbal—underlying GI distress often manifests outwardly as sudden irritability, sleep disturbances, or intense behavioral outbursts.



Motor coordination and sensory processing also play a massive role in physical well-being. Many autistic children experience mild motor impairments that make fine tasks (like writing) or gross motor skills (like catching a ball) a struggle. Compounded by sensory overload from bright lights or loud noises, these challenges mean that autistic children are significantly less likely to participate in traditional sports or daily physical activities. Recognizing these physical realities ensures we view an autistic child's behavior through a lens of comfort and health, rather than just compliance.

Signs a Child Might Be Experiencing Physical Discomfort:

- Sudden, unexplained changes in sleep patterns or heightened irritability.
- Pressing their abdomen against furniture or holding their stomach.
- Increased sensory-seeking behaviors (like rocking) to cope with internal pain.

Autistic individuals show a significantly higher prevalence of physical health issues, including a two- to four-times higher risk of experiencing bowel conditions, allergies, and neurological features like sleep disturbances or migraines (Adverse outcomes, 2026; Occurrence and overlap, 2025).

Autistic children are estimated to be up to 61% less likely to participate in regular weekly physical activity or organized sports compared to their peers, often due to underlying motor impairments or sensory sensitivities (Physical Activity, 2025).