

# Autism in the perinatal period

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# Overview

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Autism and mental health

Autism and women's health

The perinatal journey from an autistic perspective

# Note on language

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Identity-first language (autistic person) over person-first language (person with autism)

Preferred by autistic people

Recommended by NHS England

Taboas A, et al Preferences for identity-first versus person-first language in a US sample of autism stakeholders. *Autism*. 2023

[www.england.nhs.uk/learning-disabilities/about/get-involved/involving-people/making-information-and-the-words-we-use-accessible/#autism](https://www.england.nhs.uk/learning-disabilities/about/get-involved/involving-people/making-information-and-the-words-we-use-accessible/#autism)

# Brief refresher

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Prevalence c2.5%

M:F 2-3:1

ID:No-ID 1:2

Heritability c80%

Characterised by significant differences in social communication and restricted and repetitive behaviours and interests

## Social Communication

- Social emotional reciprocity, Non-verbal communication and developing and maintaining relationships

## RRBIs

- Intense interests, sensory processing, routine and rituals, stereotyped behaviours

# Autism association with mental illness

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Higher rates of:

- Psychosis
- OCD
- PTSD
- Mood disorders
- Substance misuse
- Suicide

Up to 20% of outpatient referrals to psychiatry

Lai MC et al. Prevalence of co-occurring mental health diagnoses in the autism population: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Psychiatry*. 2019

Rim SJ et al. Risk of psychiatric comorbidity with autism spectrum disorder and its association with diagnosis timing using a nationally representative cohort. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*. 2023

Nyrenius J et al. Prevalence of autism spectrum disorders in adult outpatient psychiatry. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders* 2022

# Mental health of autistic women

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Late diagnosis associated with higher rates of all mental illnesses except schizophrenia

Women are typically diagnosed later

High levels of masking are associated with worse mental health

Women typically mask more

Women have high levels of missed diagnosis and misdiagnosis – especially EUPD

Fusar-Poli L, et al Missed diagnoses and misdiagnoses of adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Eur Arch Psychiatry Clin Neurosci*. 2022

Cassidy et al Camouflaging Autistic Traits Associated with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviours? Expanding the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide in an Undergraduate Student Sample. *J Autism Dev Disord*. 2020

# Mental health of autistic women

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Autistic women have higher rates of:

- Mental health diagnosis
- Psychiatric hospitalisation
- Death in hospital
- Suicide

Than non-autistic women and autistic men

Martini et al. Sex Differences in Mental Health Problems and Psychiatric Hospitalization in Autistic Young Adults. *JAMA Psychiatry*. 2022

Hirvikovski T et al. Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *Br J Psychiatry*. 2016 Mar;208(3):232-8.

# Perinatal health of autistic women

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Higher rates of:

- Pre-eclampsia
  - Pre-term birth
  - Unplanned caesarean section
  - Antenatal depression
  - Postnatal depression
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- McDonnell et al Pregnancy and Parenthood Among Autistic Adults: Implications for Advancing Maternal Health and Parental Well-Being. *Autism Adulthood*. 2021
  - Lancaster et al Risk factors for depressive symptoms during pregnancy: a systematic review. *Am J Obstet Gynecol*. 2010 Jan;202(1):5-14



# Barriers to accessing healthcare

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Autistic women report worse experiences of antenatal and postnatal care

Researchers devised a tool for measuring healthcare accessibility

Differences between autistic and nonautistic participants could be used to screen for autism with 94% sensitivity and 72% accuracy.

Weir E, et al Autistic adults have poorer quality healthcare and worse health based on self-report data. *Mol Autism*. 2022

# Conception

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Autistic people are almost as likely to be having sex as non autistic people (and possibly more risky sex)

Autistic women have higher rates of endometriosis and PCOS – may have issues conceiving

Conception as a mini special interest

Simantov et al Medical symptoms and conditions in autistic women. *Autism*. 2022 Feb;26(2):373-388

Weir E, et al. The sexual health, orientation, and activity of autistic adolescents and adults. *Autism Res*. 2021 Nov;14(11):2342-2354

# Antenatal Care

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Lots of appointments can be overwhelming

Keep things as consistent as possible

Think about sensory environment

Interplay of anxiety, vagueness, pattern recognition and interoception around foetal movements

# Labour

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Differences in nociception

Differences in communicating pain

Prior discussions helpful

# Postnatal care

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Minimise time on the ward

Side room if possible

Accept idiosyncrasy

Give them permission to be autistic

# Motherhood

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Being autistic does not predict an inability to bond with or take cues from one's baby

Bonding with and taking cues from one's baby does not go against an autism diagnosis



# Key points

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Autism is associated with an increased risk of mental health problems and suicide

Late diagnosis is associated with increased risk, as is masking

Autistic people face significant inequalities around healthcare access

The perinatal journey can present challenges to autistic women, many of which can be overcome with simple adjustments