

IDENTIFYING EPILEPSY IN CHILDREN WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER



It is not uncommon for a child diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) to experience a seizure at some point during childhood, as seizures are the most prevalent neurological disorder associated with ASD. Incidences have

been shown to be as high as 8% in children with high-functioning ASD and as high as 30% in other groups of children with ASD.

It can be hard to differentiate symptoms of a seizure from abnormal behaviors commonly associated with ASD. In some children with ASD, behaviors that appear to be seizure-like are not seizures. For example, when most individuals think of a seizure, they identify it in terms of convulsions. However, the subtlest form is an unresponsive, staring form. Since many children with ASD have internal distractions and obsessions, it can be difficult to determine whether they are simply thinking or if it is a true seizure.

Dr. Stephen Mott, a developmental cognitive neurologist with The Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders provided the following steps for identifying an occurrence of a seizure.

1. Perform the “Dr. Mott’s Finger Touch, Nose Test”:

When a parent recognizes their child in a blank stare — not looking at a TV nor staring intently in play — immediately approach the child from the front with their finger, and touch their child’s nose.

Most children will, as the finger is approaching them, move out of the way, which indicates the child is responsive. All children will respond when their nose is touched with a grimace. This makes it an unlikely possibility that the child is experiencing a seizure. The most important reminder is that this be done as the first gesture, rather than calling the child’s name or waving, as seizures can be very brief. These can be done afterwards, if their child is not responsive.

2. If the “Dr. Mott’s Finger Touch, Nose Test” is positive:

Parents should notify their primary care provider (PCP), who should consider the possibility of a seizure, performing an awake and asleep electroencephalography (EEG), a test that detects abnormalities in brain waves; the electrical activity of your brain, to consider the possibility of seizures and/or refer to a pediatric neurologist to gain information to help make an accurate diagnosis.

3. If the EEG is positive:

Parents should be directed by their PCP for a consultation by a pediatric neurologist for a full medical workup, diagnosis and an in-depth conversation about a suggested course of treatment.

**Dr. Stephen Mott is a developmental cognitive neurologist with The Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders, UCI Health.*

