

Supporting Medical Appointments

The Importance of Support During Medical Appointments

The differences experienced by Autistic individuals (e.g., communication barriers, sensory differences, etc.) can make it more challenging for them to access and receive proper medical care, resulting in poorer overall physical and mental health outcomes in Autistic patients (Doherty et al., 2022). For this reason, providing support with navigating medical appointments is essential. Doing so not only promotes positive health outcomes, but also leads Autistic patients to have better experiences overall when seeking and receiving medical care (Wilson & Peterson, 2018).

Preparing for Success

To Prepare Yourself

- ◆ gather items needed for success (e.g., health card, requisition forms, list of medications taken, etc.)
- ◆ note developing issues to be discussed (e.g., new behaviours, difficulty sleeping, weight changes, etc.)
- ◆ call the clinic in advance to request accommodation (e.g., discuss wait times, sensory needs, etc.)
- ◆ recruit helpers to assist as needed (e.g., support staff, grandparents, siblings, etc.)

To Prepare the Individual

- ◆ provide sufficient notice to allow them the time they need to feel prepared
- ◆ use social stories, videos, and roleplay to help let them know what to expect at the appointment
- ◆ explain you'll be there to help and keep them safe
- ◆ provide calming medications if previously prescribed
- ◆ bring preferred snacks, drinks and calming items
- ◆ ensure access to sensory and communication tools

Importantly, support must be tailored to the individual. This means getting to know the person and considering things like how they experience anxiety, how they show approval (and lack thereof), how well (or not so well) past encounters with medical staff have gone, how they communicate, their sensory profile, as well as their likes and dislikes.



Providing Support During an Appointment

During the appointment itself, continue providing support by:

- ◆ calmly explaining what is happening while it takes place (i.e., provide a "play-by-play")
- ◆ assisting them in communicating with medical staff
- ◆ looking out for signs of anxiety and offering breaks
- ◆ helping with calming strategies (e.g., deep breaths)
- ◆ reassuring them they are safe throughout

Providing Support After an Appointment

To promote continued success, set aside time with the individual afterwards to discuss:

- ◆ how they felt about the appointment (e.g., What went well? What might have felt uncomfortable?)
- ◆ what could be done differently next time to make things easier
- ◆ next steps, as applicable (e.g., follow-up appts.)
- ◆ what they want as a reward for a successful visit

Doherty, M., Neilson, S., O'Sullivan, J., et al. (2022). Barriers to healthcare and self-reported adverse outcomes for autistic adults: Consequences and policy implications. A cross-sectional study. *BMJ Open*, 12, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.04.01.20050336>

Wilson, S. & Peterson, C. (2018). Medical care experiences of children with autism and their parents. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 44(6), 807-817. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12611>

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