

**Along with difficulties in communication, social interaction and rigidity of thought, many people on the autism spectrum also experience sensory issues. This information sheet gives an introduction to these issues and how to support a person with autism and sensory issues.**

For people without autism, it is hard to understand the impact of sensory issues on the lives of people with autism. Each person with autism is affected differently, so it is almost impossible to predict exactly how sensory issues will impact on a specific person.

We all experience the world through our senses and our brains interpret the sensations for us so that we can make sense of our experiences and take appropriate action (for example we feel cold so we put on a jumper). Because we experience many sensations at once, our brains have a filter system that helps us to pay attention only to what is most important and relevant at the time. This filter system may not work in the same way in people with autism.

People with autism can be either hypo- (under) or hyper- (over) sensitive to any of their senses. The experience will be different for each person, and their own sensory issues may vary depending on the day, stress and anxiety levels etc.

<b>Vision</b>	Some people with autism have an excellent eye for detail, and may see patterns, colours and forms that others do not see. This can be an asset, but it can also be distracting.
<b>Hearing</b>	Some people with autism find the pitch of certain sounds painful or notice the low hum of electrical equipment nobody else hears. They may find it hard to cope with being in a noisy environment. Others may like to have music on very loud, or enjoy loud banging.
<b>Smell</b>	Some people with autism may find it difficult to cope with strong smells like perfume and deodorant. They may find it difficult to access environments like public toilets and restaurants. Others may seek out strong smells.
<b>Touch</b>	Some people with autism do not like to be touched. They may not be able to cope with the feel of certain fabrics, or labels in clothing. Others may enjoy pressure, so may like to wear tight or heavy clothing. People with autism may experience heat, cold and pain differently.
<b>Taste</b>	Some people with autism have very limited diets, due to having particular preference for certain textures and bland food. Others may seek out strong flavours like spicy food (these people are under-sensitive to taste).
<b>Sense of balance and awareness of self in space</b>	Difficulties with these senses may cause people with autism to be clumsy or to do a lot of rocking, flapping and jumping in order to be aware of where they are in space.

## Strategies to support people with autism and sensory issues

- Be aware of each person's sensory issues and adapt your approach accordingly.
- Keep things simple to avoid over-stimulation.
- Modify the environment to suit the person's sensory needs if possible. For example you could avoid fluorescent lighting and replace it with subdued lighting, spotlights and uplighters; introduce carpets, curtains and soft furnishings to large rooms to muffle harsh sounds and echoes; and use screens or partitions to divide up large rooms.
- If it is necessary for a person with autism to de-sensitise themselves to a particular sensory issue, introduce this very gradually, always keeping the person's wellbeing as a top priority.
- Provide different textures to handle or apply light touch followed by firm pressure for tactile seekers.
- Use weighted jackets and blankets for short periods of time for people with autism who seek pressure.
- Give items to mouth, suck, bite, blow and chew and opportunities for pushing, pulling, carrying and jumping.
- Provide opportunities for rhythmical movement – jogging, swimming, trampolining, climbing, dancing.

## Useful resources

Occupational therapists run sensory integration programmes, undertake sensory assessments and can advise on a wide range of sensory equipment now available.

The following websites supply sensory toys and equipment:

[www.sensorytoywarehouse.com](http://www.sensorytoywarehouse.com)

[www.rompa.com](http://www.rompa.com)

[www.specialneedstoys.com](http://www.specialneedstoys.com)

Books and booklets:

*Sensory Perceptual Issues in Autism and Asperger Syndrome* by O Bogdashina

*The Sensory World of the Autistic Spectrum: A Greater Understanding* by K Wilkes  
(National Autistic Society)

*Asperger Syndrome and Sensory Issues* by B Smith-Myles