



2023 Draft version of the (updated) National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism in Australia

Response by

Australian Podiatry Association (APoDA)



Australian Podiatry Association

The Australian Podiatry Association (APodA) is Australia's national peak body representing podiatrists.

The Association is steeped in a long history of integrity, community care, advocating for the profession and committed to advancing podiatry to improve foot health in the community and to improve national standards.

The positive impact of podiatric care changes the lives of one in five Australians who suffer from foot pain—playing such a vital role in helping participants maintain their mobility and overall health, especially in the context of supporting participants with Autism at any age.

Through advocacy, education, and support services, the APodA helps to promote the podiatry profession, advance the quality of podiatric care, and support the professional and personal development of podiatrists in Australia

Introduction

The APodA expresses gratitude for the opportunity to provide some input into a great set of guidelines developed by the AutismCRC. The APodA congratulates the AutismCRC and all those involved in developing and updating the Guidelines, as they support driving a critical area of healthcare. The APodA welcomes the chance to contribute to the draft version of the (updated) National Guideline for the Assessment and Diagnosis of Autism in Australia.

We look forward to participating in future consultations that help to support people with Autism.

Podiatry and Autism Spectrum Disorder

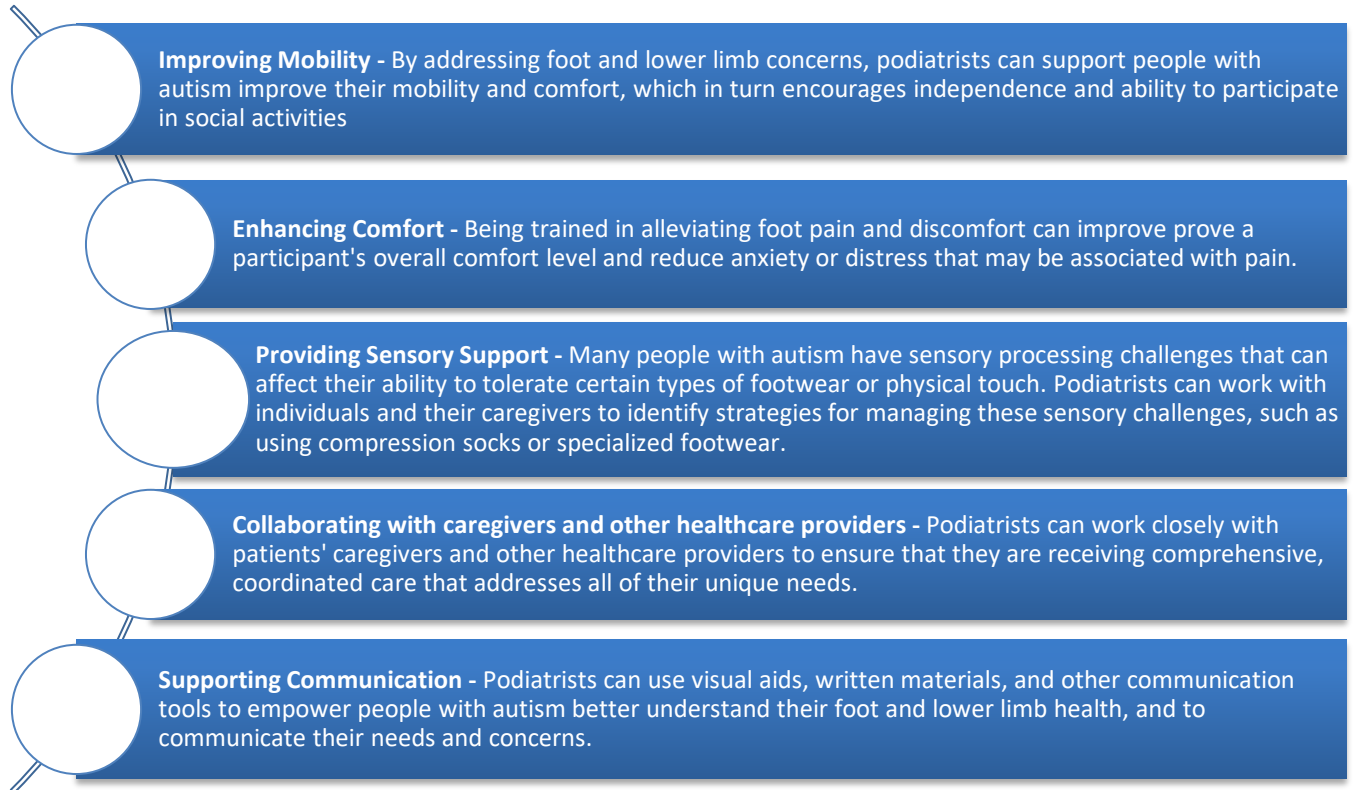
The updated 2023 guidelines for the assessment and diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Australia provides an evidence-based framework for practitioners to conduct effective and appropriate assessments(1).

Having an update to date, Guideline is essential for professional associations and individual practitioners in providing the best available evidence, modern ways of thinking, and up-to-date perspectives from the autistic and autism communities(2).

Podiatrists can play an important role in helping people with autism reach their goals and objectives, not just medically but socially, by offering comprehensive care and support that considers a person's unique needs and goals.



Achieving Goals: How Podiatrists Can Support



Podiatry: A Foundation for Support

Assessment of Foot Posture

Idiopathic toe walking (toe walking) is when a person walks with reduced or limited heel strike at the initial contact phase of the gait cycle and the absence of full foot contact during stance phase of gait(3). Although a common variation during gait acquisition, there are many conditions that could cause toe walking, such as neurological, developmental and behavioral conditions(4).

A neurodevelopmental disorder, ASD has been associated with a higher prevalence of toe walking in children with ASD(5). Podiatrists are able to use a number of assessments, but in particular is the foot posture index that offers a robust approach to assessing static foot structure and the supporting future development plans(6).

Impact of Tone Changes

Podiatrists play a vital role in the comprehensive care of children with ASD. Research has shown that a significant number of children with ASD, approximately 25%, exhibit hypotonia, which is low muscle tone. This can affect the development of proper foot posture and stability(7).

Furthermore, studies have highlighted that limb apraxia, a condition characterised by difficulty in performing

coordinated movements, is present in approximately 30% of high-functioning autistic children and a striking 75% of low-functioning children with autism(7). Podiatrists can assess and address these motor challenges through specialised interventions, such as prescribing appropriate orthotic devices, recommending specific exercises to improve muscle tone and coordination, and providing guidance on footwear and gait modifications.

By addressing these issues, podiatrists contribute to improving the mobility, stability, and overall quality of life for people with ASD.

Balance Assessment

Podiatrists play a vital role in addressing the motor impairments associated with ASD. Although ASD is primarily characterised by social and communication difficulties, motor deficits have also been observed. These deficits include delays in motor milestone development, motor incoordination, clumsiness, impaired reach-to-grasp movement, and deficits in gross and fine motor skills. Furthermore, impaired postural control is often present in individuals with ASD(8).

Podiatrists can contribute in addressing motor challenges by assessing and addressing issues related to gait, coordination, muscle tone, and postural control. Through interventions such as orthotic devices, targeted exercises, and recommendations for appropriate footwear, podiatrists can help improve motor function and enhance the overall quality of life for individuals with ASD.

Sensory Processing and Orthotic Usage

Many individuals with ASD experience sensory processing difficulties, including hypersensitivity or hyposensitivity to sensory stimuli(9). Podiatrists can contribute to addressing these challenges by understanding the sensory needs of individuals with ASD and recommending appropriate solutions, including orthotic therapy.

Through the utilisation of personalised medical devices, such as shoe inserts or ankle-foot orthoses, podiatrists can help individuals with ASD manage sensory sensitivities and promote better mobility and balance.

Nail Care and Dermatological Issues

Podiatrists play a vital role in supporting patients with autism in maintaining and improving their mobility while addressing nail care and dermatological issues. Individuals with autism may face challenges related to sensory sensitivities, which can make routine tasks like nail trimming or addressing dermatological concerns more challenging(10).

Podiatrists can provide considerate and person-centred care as part of a coordinated multidisciplinary team, considering the person's unique sensory needs. By creating an inclusive and comfortable environment, podiatrists can support people with autism overcome certain anxieties or sensory challenges associated with nail care all the whilst empowering the patient to achieve their functional and social goals (11).

Being lower limb specialists, podiatrists can also offer education and guidance on proper foot hygiene and recommend appropriate footwear to prevent nail and dermatological issues from arising.

By addressing these concerns, podiatrists can support patients with autism in maintaining their mobility and help them pursue their goals, such as participating in activities like soccer, while promoting their overall foot health.

Podiatry Supporting People: Case studies

Case Study 1

John is a 10-year-old boy with autism who has been referred to a podiatrist by his General practitioner (GP). John's parents have noticed that he has been walking on the inside of his feet, and they're concerned about the long-term effects.

The podiatrist begins by conducting a thorough physical examination, including a gait analysis and a biomechanical evaluation of John's lower limbs. The podiatrist also considers John's unique sensory needs and communication challenges when developing a treatment plan.

During John's consultation the podiatrist observes persistent/idiopathic toe walking. To address this condition, as part of a co-ordinated effort with other healthcare professionals, the podiatrist recommends custom-made orthotics to correct John's foot alignment and improve his gait. The orthotics also have features to accommodate John's sensory needs, extra padding and softer material.

The podiatrist also works with John's parents to provide education and guidance on proper foot care and hygiene. This includes teaching John how to trim his toenails properly, as well as how to choose appropriate shoes that fit well and provide proper support.

Over the course of several follow-up visits, the podiatrist monitors John's progress and makes adjustments to his treatment plan as needed. Through ongoing collaboration with John's GP and other healthcare providers, the podiatrist helps to ensure that John is receiving comprehensive, coordinated care that addresses all of his needs and supports his goals.

Case Study 2

James is an 80-year-old man with autism who is living in a residential aged-care facility. James has been experiencing foot pain and difficulty walking, which is affecting his ability to participate in any physical activities.

The podiatrist conducts a thorough physical assessment, including a gait analysis and a biomechanical evaluation of James' lower limbs. The podiatrist also takes into consideration James' unique sensory and communication needs when developing a treatment plan.

The podiatrist diagnoses James with plantar fasciitis, resulting in James' pain and difficulty walking. To address this, the podiatrist recommends a combination of interventions, including foot and ankle exercises, custom-made orthotics, and pain management strategies.

The podiatrist works with James' multidisciplinary team, including his General Practitioner and occupational therapist, to develop a comprehensive treatment plan that seeks to address his pain, mobility, and overall health and well-being.

Summary

The APodA would like to congratulate the development of the guidelines and the review of the guidelines. As the peak body representing Podiatry, we feel it important to ensure that assessment and treatment that might play a part in helping the care, support and advice for those who have a diagnosis of Autism. In fact, all people with some of the symptoms that Podiatrists would be able to play a supportive and assistive role. We have provided some case examples to outline these in a practical sense and recommend that Podiatry be considered as an inclusion in *Appendix 2.3: Other practitioners who may contribute information relevant to assessment and diagnosis*.

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