

Many adults on the autism spectrum are in, or are thinking about being in, a sexual relationship. This information gives an introduction to different aspects of sexual behaviour.

Public and private space

Some places are considered to be 'public' and others are 'private'. It is important to know which spaces are public and which are private so that you know which set of rules to use. Sexual behaviour is not appropriate in public spaces. This is because it may upset other people and can make you vulnerable. It is also sometimes against the law so you may get into trouble.

Outside of your house, or the house of someone that you know and trust, is public space. In your house, bedrooms and bathrooms are usually private spaces. This does not mean that you can't go into these rooms, it just means that you should knock on the door and wait for permission to enter any bedroom that isn't your own and any bathroom, if they are occupied. You should try not to go into other people's bedrooms without being invited, even if they are not in there as that is their personal space.

If it is your bedroom, you can also expect people to do the same. They should knock on your door and ask permission before entering your room. This means that your bedroom is a safe, private place, as is the room of any person that you know and trust, if they have given you permission to enter.

If you do not share a house with anyone else then all the rooms are yours and can reasonably be considered safe, private spaces.

However, the rules change if you are not alone. Even if you are in your own private space, if there are other people present - except a girlfriend or boyfriend - then the space becomes public.

Discussing sex

It is fine to discuss sexual matters as long as you are talking to someone you can trust, and you are talking to them in private. Your family and close friends that you trust are good people to talk to but you may also talk to a doctor or nurse if you have questions about sex and sexual health.

Talking about sex can sometimes be overwhelming as lots of people are not comfortable with the subject. However, with close friends, family and health and care professionals, you should be open and upfront about any questions that you have. A lack of understanding along with difficulties understanding the motivations and thoughts of others can lead people with autism open to abuse and exploitation. You should not worry about this too much but you should always be careful to keep yourself safe and ask someone you trust if you are unsure about anything.

Masturbation

Masturbation is when you get the urge to touch your sexual organs because it feels good. This is a completely normal impulse and nearly everybody does it. However, it is a private activity and so should only be done in private and when you are alone or with a romantic partner - a girlfriend or boyfriend.

Sometimes, people do not spontaneously learn to masturbate which means that they may not know all they need to about masturbation. If you feel like this may be true for you then you can research the biological side of masturbation as this may help you to understand your body more fully. This self-exploration is an important part of developing a strong sense of self and an understanding of your own body. These things are important for a healthy sex life.

Sometimes masturbation can become compulsive and you may feel unable to stop doing it. This is something that should be addressed as there may be an underlying cause that is creating the need for the stimulation. If this can be addressed then masturbation can be decreased to a healthier level.

Communication and respect

It is very important to respect yourself and know what you enjoy. You should make sure to communicate your interests and needs to a person if you enter into a relationship with them. You should also be sure to respect your partner and other people and their right to have different needs to you and to express those needs. Relationships are about communication, negotiation and mutual consent and a relationship without these things may be very damaging.

Self-respect may also involve looking at your body image and how you feel about yourself. You should always feel confident about yourself and other people should not make you feel bad or insecure. It can be easy to feel isolated and unattractive, particularly when the media constantly displays unattainable examples of perfection. This is a very normal concern and most people feel insecure sometimes. If you love and respect yourself, this will help others to do the same.

Social skills

To form romantic relationships with others, you will need specific, and sometimes complex, social skills. Remember that each person has a different point of view. Just because you like someone in a romantic way this does not mean that they feel the same about you. You should always ask a person before doing anything with them because they may not want to do the same things you want to. However, if someone does not want the same things as you, they may still really like you as a person.

If you like someone and want to spend more time with them, it is a good idea to ask open questions to people like "Would you like to go out with me some time?" so you do not sound pushy or too forward.

Friends and family can help you by discussing ideas and questions that you may have and explaining anything that you don't understand.

Sensory issues

Sensory issues can present a problem for you when you want to begin a romantic relationship. If you are oversensitive to touch, but would like to be touched, you may want to work on desensitising yourself to the things that you find difficult. This will help you to increase your tolerance for those things. However, you do not need to do anything that makes you uncomfortable and it is not fair for anyone to force you to do things that cause you anxiety.

Equally, those people who are undersensitive to touch may enjoy the touch of another person too much and this can also cause problems. You must ensure that you only engage in touching with others if they want you to. Touching others and having them touch you may be extremely enjoyable on a sensory level but you must be careful not to make constant demands of others to indulge your need for touch.

Different types of relationships

For many reasons, some people with autism choose to remain celibate. They may not be interested in sexual activity or they may not want to form close emotional bonds with others. Others simply do not see the point of a long-term relationship. This is normal and if it is right for you then there is no problem.

However, long-term relationships can be extremely rewarding and can provide you with a partner in life who will love and understand you and your needs.

Sometimes, there are people who only want to have sex once or a few times, but they do not want a relationship. It can be hard to recognise this as the person may be willing to lie to convince you to have sex with them. The key to avoiding these people is getting to know people and letting your friends and family meet them so that they can help you to establish whether the person is genuine or not. It is important that you feel safe and respected before you have sex.

Sexuality

It is also important to understand that it is totally normal to be attracted to a variety of people. A lot of relationships are between a man and a woman but it is perfectly acceptable for you to be attracted to anyone. Some people are only attracted to people of the opposite sex, some prefer members of the same sex and some people are attracted to both. All of these are normal impulses and you can form lasting relationships with a person of either sex.

Safe sex and sexual health

You should always practice safe sex. This means that you use a form of contraception during sex. During sex you could contract a sexually transmitted infection (STI). If you are a woman, you can also get pregnant. Women can take a pill, have an injection or an implant, or use various devices to stop them getting pregnant. However, the only way to avoid both STIs and pregnancy is to use a condom which the man wears on his penis. Instructions for use are included with packets of condoms.

Women over the age of 25 also have smear tests which are performed by a doctor to check that they are sexually healthy and have no problems with their sexual organs.

Breasts and testicles are places where cancer can form and so they should be checked regularly for lumps. These are private areas so you should check them for yourself if you can or ask only someone you trust to help. You must see a GP as soon as possible if you do find a lump, they will be able to explain what to do next.

Do I want to have sex?

If you want to know if you should have sex you should ask yourself:

- Do I want to have sex?
- Does the other person want to have sex?
- Do I want to have sex with this particular person?
- Do I feel safe and respected?
- Are we in a private, safe place?
- Are we both over the age of 16? (This is the legal age of consent in Britain)
- Am I happy to have sex before I am married? (Some people choose to wait until they are married before they have sex)
- Do I know how to have sex?
- Do I have contraception to keep me safe?

If you have any doubts or questions, ask somebody that you trust to help you to understand.