

# Autism and suicidality

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# Autistic people are at a higher risk of suicide and suicidal behaviours than non-autistic people

- Autistic people are around 7 x more likely than non-autistic people to **die by suicide** (1,2), this gap is larger for certain groups, such as:
  - Autistic people without a co-occurring learning disability (around 9 x more likely; 2)
  - Autistic women (around 13 x more likely; 2)
- In August 2024, the [National Child Mortality Database \(NCMD\)](#) found that ‘**suicide or deliberate self-inflicted harm**’ was the most common category of death in autistic children without a learning disability –35% of those deaths
- Autistic people are up to 6 x more likely to **attempt suicide** than the general population (3)
- Autistic people without a co-occurring learning disability are around 9 x more likely to experience **suicidal ideation** than non-autistic people (4,5)
- Prevalence of **self-injurious behaviours** may be around 42% in autistic people (6)



# Undiagnosed autistic people are at higher risk of suicide and suicidal behaviours than non-autistic people

- High rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviours have been found for both autistic and possibly autistic people - i.e., those who are diagnosed, and undiagnosed people with high levels of autistic traits (5)
- Elevated autistic traits may also be over-represented in those who die by suicide (7)
- [NCMD](#), August 2024 – ‘suicide or deliberate self-inflicted harm’ accounted for 56% of deaths of children who were either awaiting an autism assessment or had autistic traits mentioned in their records (without a learning disability).



# LeDeR

## Learning from Lives and Deaths – people with a learning disability and autistic people (LeDeR) programme

- For autistic adults without a learning disability whose deaths were reported to LeDeR ([2021-2022](#)), the most common cause of death was suicide, misadventure, or accidental death
- Emergent themes from quality-of-care reviews include:
  - A lack of awareness/understanding of autistic people and their needs
  - A lack of adequate support tailored towards the needs of autistic people
  - A lack of crisis escalation plans, or a lack of an awareness of the increased risk of suicide in autistic adults



# Autistic people experience barriers accessing care

Despite these powerful statistics, barriers prevent autistic people at risk for suicide from getting the attention, treatment and support they need.

- Autistic people report having referrals rejected for mental health services on account of their autism diagnosis (16)
- Providers often report lack of confidence and expertise in supporting autistic clients, particularly those who feel suicidal (17)
- Lack of staff training or awareness around autism (8,16)
- Accessing services can be overly complex and disjointed (16)
- Services may rely on methods of communication that are inaccessible for autistic people, such as phone communication (18,19)
- Reasonable adjustments to care not consistently being offered (20)
- Healthcare settings, such as doctors' surgeries, waiting rooms and assessment rooms may be inaccessible because they do not account for autistic people's sensory processing needs (18,21,22)
- Interventions less likely to be evidence-based or to be adapted to suit autistic people's needs (23)

# Assessment and intervention

## Guidance on assessment and intervention

2022 NICE guideline, [Self-harm: assessment, management and preventing recurrence](#), states to **not use risk assessment tools and scales or global risk stratification into low, medium and high risk** to predict future suicide or repetition of self-harm, or to determine who should and should not be offered treatment or discharged. **An assessment should be focused on the person's needs and how to support their immediate and long-term psychological and physical safety.**

## Measures specific to autistic people

- Limited evidence on effective assessments and interventions to identify and treat suicidality in autistic people (24,25,26,27)
- There are several tools in development as part of the [Mental Health in Autism](#) project at Nottingham, but **these are not yet validated for use in clinical settings**
- Researchers from this group have also worked with autistic people to develop [Autism Adapted Suicide Safety Plans](#) (AASSP), that aim to reduce self-harm and suicide behaviours, **these have initial feasibility evidence**
  - A trial of these plans with autistic people experiencing self-harm or suicidal ideation found that 68% were satisfied with them and 41% rated them as usable (28,29)



# Policy and guidance

NICE guidance on [preventing suicide in community and custodial settings](#) (2018)

Identified autistic people as being amongst those at high risk of suicide

DHSC [suicide prevention strategy for England: 2023 to 2028](#)

As of September 2023, autistic people (both diagnosed and undiagnosed) are recognised in the strategy as a priority group. This states:

**“it is essential that health, mental health, and local authority services and education providers consider the needs of autistic people in suicide prevention activity.”**

The Autism Research Team:

- Collaborated with DHSC and key researchers to make the case for including autistic people in the strategy
- Supported development of the strategy and content within the strategy related to autistic people, including reviewing and shaping strategic action points

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