



Sensory Stimuli That Can Be A Challenge for a Person with Autism

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“My Autism sensory sensitivities are more than just a dislike or a preference; they are more than a nuisance or something I can tune out or get used to... they are often disorienting, painful, disabling, isolating, and make it hard to coordinate my body. They make carrying out daily tasks and communications exhausting and sometimes impossible.” Kim Clairry, adult with Autism

Below is a generalized list of sensory stimuli to be aware of within medical settings. Be sure to think about your personal setting and what other factors not listed may be problematic for an individual with Autism. Ways to accommodate some of these challenging stimuli are provided but keep in mind that the individual just may need patience, understanding, extra time to process information, and nonverbal ways to communicate.

Visual

- Bright lights, especially fluorescent lights (they cast shadows and make a humming noise)
- Visually busy equipment or items (i.e. food trays, monitor screens or buttons, equipment wire hook ups, clutter on bedside table)
- Visually busy spaces (i.e. ER, hospital hallway, walls with posters/pictures, waiting rooms, cafeteria, wheelchairs in hallway)
- Moving people and objects (i.e. objects outside the window/door, other staff/patients, rotating fans, doors opening/closing etc.)
- Fast moving objects or body movements (i.e. provider moving too fast, images on screens)

How to Accommodate

- Turn the lights off and use natural lighting if possible
- Use lamps rather than overhead lights
- Suggest for them to wear sunglasses or a hat to help dampen the light
- Offer a less busy waiting room option
- Cover equipment buttons (such as on a feeding tube monitor) with a plain cloth



Auditory

- Sounds of lawn care equipment, fans, vacuums, hand dryers, sirens
- Television and/or radio being on or on too loudly
- Several people talking at once, chatter from hallways, and/or talking from adjacent rooms
- The humming sound of noises from things such as fluorescent lights, computers, sanitary paper on mats, air conditioners, wheels on carts, opening/closing of doors, ringing phones, typing, phone chargers, etc.
- Sounds from medical equipment such as an MRI, heart monitor, walker, safety alarms, etc.

How to Accommodate

- Offer disposable earplugs
- Turn down or off music and television
- Warn before the use of noisy equipment such as a vacuum
- Suggest to the person to go to a quieter area
- Consider outside noises such as lawn maintenance and offer to temporarily move patient to a location far from noise

Tactile

- Wind and water (i.e. wind from a fan or air conditioner; and water from a faucet or rain)
- Light or unexpected touch such as during an exam, a friendly gesture, security check pat down, ADL care, spinal tap, etc
- Medical gowns, hospital socks, ID bracelets
- Temperature changes (i.e. getting out of a shower or the touch of the buttocks on the toilet seat)
- Equipment such as blood pressure cuff, thermometer, wires hooked up for an echocardiogram, stethoscope, nasal cannula, etc.
- Using alternative coverings for problematic textures

How to Accommodate

- Ask before touching patient
- Allow patient to wear own clothing if possible (rather than gown)
- Remove tags from hospital gowns



- Consider alternatives to needed equipment to limit the light touch on skin (e.g. oxygen mask vs. cannula)

Taste

- Medications
- Swabs/Tongue Depressors/Thermometer
- Different foods than used to (if admitted to a hospital)
- Vomit

How to Accommodate

- Allow patient to bring in own food
- Collaborate on solutions to successfully take medications
- Offer an oral spray or mint that will overpower the stimuli of noxious tastes

Smell

- Scent of cleaning products or lysol
- Smell of someone heating up their lunch in nearby lunchroom
- Strong perfume, cologne, soap, and/or lotion
- Mixed scents from the cafeteria or food on a tray
- Medications
- Urine

How to Accommodate

- Ask before spraying cleaning products in patient's room
- Limit use of scented products
- Offer unscented soaps and other products
- Allow person to eat outside of the cafeteria setting

Vestibular/Proprioception

- Riding in or pushing a wheelchair
- Sitting on Elevated Surfaces (exam table)
- Being tilted back in spaces (exam table)
- Being transported on a gurney or bed
- Hospital beds, chairs, mats, and medical tests that move the person
- Turning of the head during an exam or medical care
- Elevators
- Being required to sit or be still



How to Accommodate

- Allow to move during appointment
- Limit non-self directed movement
- Ask before moving patient
- Provide alternative to an elevated exam table