

Autism & Aging: A Guide for Physicians



Why This Matters

Adults with autism and intellectual/developmental disabilities (I/DD) are living longer than ever before. As they age, they face a higher prevalence of dementia and complex co-occurring medical conditions. Physicians are often the first line in recognizing subtle health changes — yet traditional diagnostic tools may not capture the full picture for nonverbal or profoundly autistic adults.

Key Statistics

- Adults with autism are up to **3x more likely** to develop dementia; prevalence may be **1 in 3**.
- On average, **autistic adults often have equal or greater primary-care contact (more outpatient visits) than peers** — but self-report and preventive-care data reveal important gaps: many autistic adults cannot access care as often as they need, receive lower rates of some preventive services, and experience lower quality encounters.
- Healthcare issues are the **leading driver of discharges** from aging services.
- Co-occurring **mental health diagnoses** affect nearly **half** of Bancroft's adult population.

Red Flags for Dementia in Adults with Autism

Because many patients are nonverbal, physicians must rely on alternative cues:

- Noticeable changes in **sleep, appetite, or movement**
- Decreased ability to engage with staff, family, or activities they once enjoyed
- Increased **behavioral incidents** (agitation, withdrawal, repetitive actions)
- Physical signs such as **difficulty swallowing** or motor skill loss (UNC research)

Clinical Considerations

- **Screening Tools:** Traditional cognitive tests may not be valid. Observation, caregiver reports, and eye-tracking studies are promising alternatives.
- **Whole-Person Health:** Comorbidities (cardiovascular, psychiatric, gastrointestinal) often overlap and complicate presentation.
- **Medication Review:** Adults with I/DD often take multiple prescriptions. Regular review is critical.
- **DSP Collaboration:** Direct support professionals are key reporters of daily changes. Consider their input as part of the diagnostic picture.

Best Practices for Physicians

- Incorporate **dementia screening protocols** for patients with autism over 50.
- Use structured caregiver/DSP interviews to capture changes.
- Ensure preventive screenings (cardiac, metabolic, neurological) remain on schedule.
- Partner with specialty clinics like Bancroft's Cooper Mobile Clinic and the upcoming Rowan Autism Center for Inclusive Wellness to coordinate care.

The OneBancroft Collaborative for Community Health is:

- Convening experts through seminars and roundtables on autism and aging.
- Exploring AI and robotics as early-detection tools.
- Leading grant-funded research on health and profound autism.
- Developing toolkits and CME opportunities to support physicians in practice.

Partner With Us

To learn more about clinical resources, referrals, or research partnerships, contact:



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About Bancroft

Bancroft offers a range of programs and resources that are designed to help children with autism unlock their potential and prepare for a bright future. We invite you to visit our Children's Services page to learn more about how we can support your child on their journey to success. We also offer programs for adults with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities including day and vocational programs, as well as residential services. Visit our Adult Services page to learn more.

