

The “Burgers” Disease

Sorry... no fries with this one!

Recently my son and I participated in Walk Now for Autism Speaks in Sioux Falls, a national fundraiser created to help build awareness and fund research for Autism Spectrum Disorders.

My husband and I have four children, one of whom was diagnosed with Aspergers at the age of three years old. He is now ten.

Aspergers is a high functioning form of Autism. Seven years ago, when my son was first diagnosed, the doctors said about one in 1,000 children had at least one form of the autism spectrum disorder. Recent reports state it affects as many as one in 500 children with only one in four of those being female. Those reports are somewhat startling. It was not thought, at first, to be hereditary, although recent studies have shown this to be the case. We have three cousins with some form of autism. But with the high rate in males versus females, researchers feel it might also be hormonal, making the search for a cause, even harder.

We felt something was wrong at the age of two when our son wasn't talking, but we could tell he fully understood us. He used to love to watch TV (and still does) and would almost go into a “zombie” state when the TV was on. At age two, we used to lay out about 50 black VCR tapes, with no covers, on the floor and ask him to pick out “Barney ABC” or “Elmo in Grouchland.” He could pick out any one we asked him too, understanding what we said, but not being able to express himself. My son would throw terrible temper tantrums and had a hard time keeping focused when I would sit down with him and try to play games or color.

We took him to the pediatrician who told us to wait and see, due to the fact that children progress at different rates. When he wasn't speaking by age 3 and the doctor's couldn't help us find out what was wrong, I started looking into other avenues, such as the Web and books to help me “self-diagnose” the situation. I'll admit I

was desperate, almost passionate, to find an answer.

I just knew that he was not progressing normally. That's when I talked to a friend, whose nephew had just been diagnosed with Aspergers. She said, at that time, they had only really diagnosed this form of autism in the past 10 years and very little research had been done up to that point.

We found a specialist in Lincoln, Neb., and my son was diagnosed at age three. We were told we were lucky that he was diagnosed at such an early age to receive appropriate intervention services as early as possible.

I have to say that at first, we were bewildered – not

knowing what to do next. There's really no medication for Autism. There's meds to help with the symptoms, such as getting agitated or helping him stay focused, but it's not like cancer. You can't beat it or be “cured.” Because it was such a newly diagnosed disease, our options weren't really clear and it was still a wait-and-see approach as to how he would progress. Available educational services were also unclear due to his age and the newness of the disease.

At age four to five, he went from not speaking at all to speaking in full sentences and we noticed that he had quite a memory and vocabulary, using words like “delicious” and “phenomenal” in appropriate context. Memory is enhanced for our son. He can watch a TV show or movie just once and be able to repeat a majority

