

Accessible eye care for Autistic people: a practical guide for vision professionals

What is autism?

Autism is a form of neurodivergence that shapes how people experience, interact with, and make sense of the world around them. It is characterised by differences in communication, social interaction, sensory processing, and patterns of thinking or behaviour. Autistic people may be highly sensitive to sensory input such as sounds, lights, or touch, and may prefer routines and predictability. Communication styles vary widely. Some Autistic people use speech, others communicate non-verbally, and many benefit from assistive tools.

Why inclusive eye care for Autistic people matters

Autism is estimated to be experienced by at least 1 in 40 Australians, and Autistic people are more likely to have vision-related needs than the general population. Despite this, many Autistic people encounter barriers when accessing eye care, such as overwhelming sensory environments, unclear communication, rigid systems, and a lack of understanding from providers. These are not minor issues. They can lead to delayed or avoided care, missed diagnoses, and preventable vision problems that impact daily life, learning, participation, and wellbeing.

Eye care professionals are motivated to provide good care, but many report feeling underprepared or unsupported when working with Autistic patients. At the same time, small and achievable changes, such as clearer explanations, more flexible appointment structures, or attention to sensory needs, can make a meaningful difference.

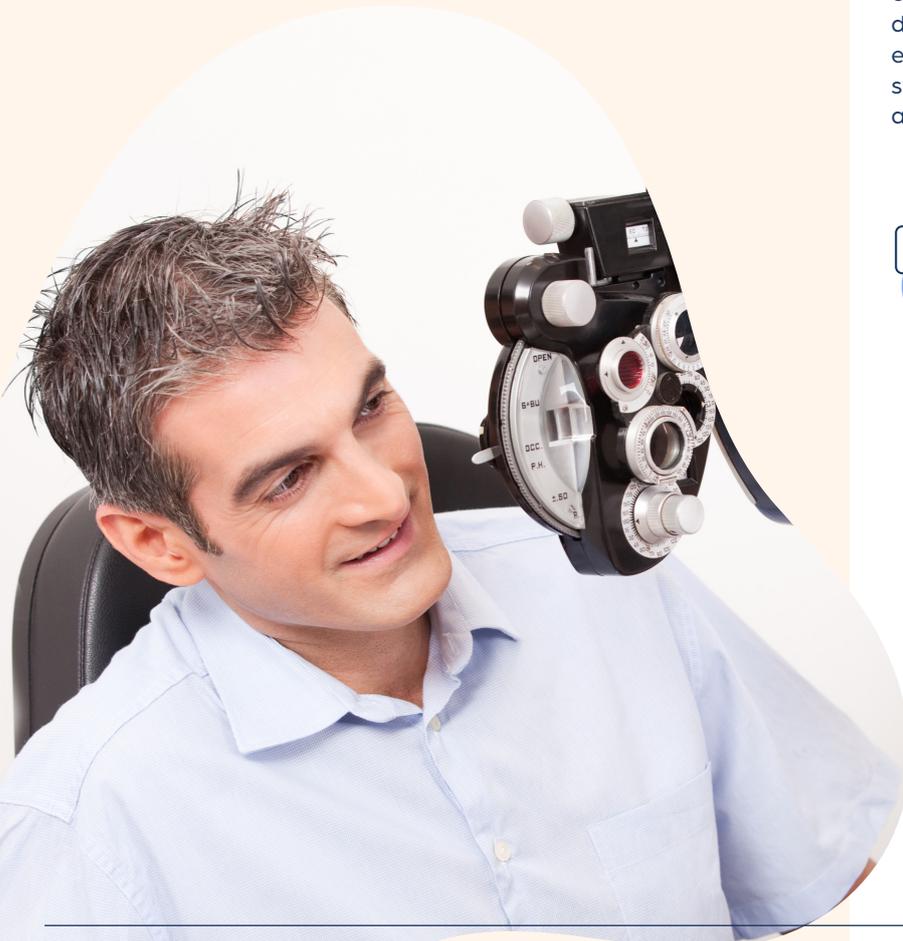
This guide brings together the voices and expertise of Autistic adults, families, and professionals, drawing on findings from Aspect's autism and eye care research, to offer practical, respectful strategies for delivering eye care that is accessible and affirming.



"I would love clearer communication to become the default." Autistic adult

"Giving of your time and listening well may be the most valuable tools." Ophthalmologist

"Obviously every patient is different and I will adapt my technique depending on the symptoms and or needs of the patient." Optometrist



Recommendations for making eye care more accessible for Autistic people



Category	What can your practice do?	What can you do when supporting an Autistic person?
Before the appointment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use pre-visit forms to gather communication, sensory, and access needs. Share clear appointment details: who, what, when, and how long. Offer preparation tools like clinic photos or short guides. Provide flexible booking (e.g. quiet times, longer slots). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review access information and plan adjustments in advance. Remind patients what to expect and ask about any specific needs.
Creating a supportive environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce light, noise, and strong scents in patient areas. Offer quiet alternatives to waiting rooms (e.g. wait outside or in a low-stimulation space). Have a quiet, private space available where patients can pause and recover if needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask about sensory comfort and adjust lighting, sound, or space as needed. Respect personal space; always explain and seek consent before physical contact. Let patients handle equipment beforehand to reduce unfamiliarity.
Communicating effectively	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use plain, literal language across all materials and interactions. Offer non-verbal booking and follow-up (SMS, email, web forms). Provide visual aids to support understanding during care. Offer a written or visual summary of key outcomes, instructions, and next steps. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speak clearly and literally; avoid metaphors or unclear language. Confirm understanding using closed, respectful questions (e.g. "Does that sound okay?"). Allow time for responses without rushing or filling silences.
Adapting the examination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Equip staff with practical training on adapting tests for different needs. Support clinical flexibility in test order and pacing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prioritise key tests early in case the full exam can't be completed. Offer brief, simple choices (e.g. pause or continue) to support autonomy. Adapt methods based on comfort, and skip or revisit non-essential tests if needed. Explain procedures like dilation clearly, and offer to delay if overwhelming.
Responding with respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Train all staff in autism and neurodiversity awareness. Normalise diverse communication and behaviours (e.g. stimming, silence). Invite patient feedback to improve accessibility. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Acknowledge distress without judgment; thank patients for sharing needs. Stay calm if a patient is overwhelmed; offer space and time. Avoid comparisons or comments like "most people find this easy." Focus on trust and comfort, not compliance.

Looking for more information?

Aspect: What is autism? aspect.org.au/about-autism/what-is-autism

Aspect: Autism and eye care research aspect.org.au/eye-care

University of Manchester: Autism and vision resources sites.manchester.ac.uk/autism-and-vision



Want to explore how your service can become more accessible to Autistic people?

Contact Aspect's Autism Friendly team aspect.org.au/autism-friendly