HEALTH EXPERTS ARE ADVISING all physicians who care for children to look for early signs of autism spectrum disorders.

Two new clinical reports from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) provide information on the early diagnosis and treatment of autism spectrum disorders, including autistic disorder, Asperger disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder—not otherwise specified. Both reports will be part of the new AAP practical resource for pediatricians, AUTISM: Caring for Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders: A Resource Toolkit for Clinicians.

The most significant recommendation is to screen all children at age 18 months and 24 months. “This is the first time that the Academy has recommended universal screening rather than just when a parent is concerned,” said co-author Chris Plauche Johnson, MD, MEd, clinical professor of pediatrics at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio.

A recent US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study of communities in 14 states found that approximately 1 in 150 children have an autism spectrum disorder (Kuehn BM. JAMA. 2007; 297[9]:940). The new guidelines could help physicians diagnose these children early so that treatment can be given as soon as possible—but only if they are used, said Johnson. “Pediatricians are already overwhelmed with all of the things we’ve asked them to do,” she noted.

One of the 2 reports, Identification and Evaluation of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders, provides screening tests and surveillance tools for recognizing some of the subtle signs that may arise before language delays become evident (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/peds.2007-2361v1.pdf). These signs include not turning in response to the parent, lack of back-and-forth babbling, late smiling, and failure to make eye contact with others.

Also, if a parent or caregiver has concerns that may relate to autism spectrum disorders at any age, the guidelines recommend that physicians use a standardized screening tool to assess the child. Signs that are indications for immediate evaluation include no babbling or pointing by 12 months, no single words by 16 months, and no 2-word spontaneous phrases by 24 months.

Vigilance for signs of autism is important, but Johnson hopes that the recommendations do not cause anxiety among parents. “I worry about making parents a little overanxious so that any sort of speech delay or flapping of hands makes a parent think their child has autism,” she said.

Linked to the AAP toolkit are videos from Autism Speaks, a nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing awareness of autism. “A clinician or parent can choose from various characteristics related to autism—speech, eye contact, doesn’t pay attention—and 2 videos come up side by side. One shows a normal child while another shows a child diagnosed with autism,” explained Bob Wright, co-founder of Autism Speaks.

The second AAP clinical report, Management of Children With Autism Spectrum Disorders, highlights early interventions that are important for effective treatment (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/cgi/reprint/peds.2007-2362v1.pdf). The report advises intervention as soon as a diagnosis is seriously considered, for at least 25 hours per week in settings with a low student-to-teacher ratio. Parents should also be included in therapy sessions.

For controlling problems such as tantrums, aggressive behaviors, and self-injury, the report recommends behavior management strategies and, in some cases, medications. In addition, guidance is provided for treating children with autism spectrum disorders who have seizures, gastrointestinal problems, and sleep disturbances.

Ongoing autism research indicates that the earlier therapy is initiated, the better. “The brain is the most plastic early in life,” said Andy Shih, PhD, vice president of scientific affairs at Autism Speaks.

Experts also hope that the guidelines will make it easier for parents to obtain autism treatment for their children. “These guidelines should put pressure on states to pass rules mandating insurance coverage for therapies,” said Wright.

Officials also are anxious to see if the guidelines have a positive effect on autism diagnosis and treatment. “We’re doing a study right now looking at the feasibility of these guidelines,” said Johnson. “I’m sure there will be bugs to work out and ways to improve the tools, but this is a first step.”

New clinical reports recommend that all physicians who care for children learn how to detect autism spectrum disorders in patients by age 24 months.