

research snapshot

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Anxiety and Sensory Over-Responsivity Are Related to Gastrointestinal Problems in Children With Autism Spectrum Disorder

What is this research about?

People with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) commonly experience high rates of anxiety and are often very sensitive to different stimuli like light, noise or tactile experiences. Also, a significant portion of people with ASD experience gastrointestinal (GI) problems such as constipation, abdominal pain, bloating, diarrhea, and/or nausea. Previous studies within the typically developing population suggest that there a relationship between anxiety, sensory over-responsivity, and GI problems. This research examined whether these relationships are also found in children and youth with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers studied 2,973 children and teens with ASD between 2 and 17 years of age registered in a North American multi-site network of families, clinicians and researchers called the Autism Treatment Network.

Parent(s) filled out questionnaires regarding the child's:

- Sensory over-responsiveness to sensory stimuli
- General anxiety
- GI problems

What you need to know:

Children with ASD who have high levels of anxiety and are very sensitive to different stimuli may also be more likely to have gastrointestinal problems. Interventions for youth with ASD targeting at least one of these issues, such as anxiety, may also help improve related issues, such as gastrointestinal problems.

- Cognitive functioning
- Demographics

What did the researchers find?

The researchers found a strong relationship between anxiety and sensory over-responsivity among the participating children and teens with ASD. Both anxiety and sensory over-responsivity predicted the total number of GI symptoms and type of GI symptoms, with the exception of chronic diarrhea. Children's age, gender, cognitive functioning, and ethnic background were not related to having GI problems.

How can you use this research?

The findings suggest that treating one of the problems addressed in this research, such as anxiety, may also address other related issues, such as GI problems or sensory over-responsivity.

Researchers should also note the importance of investigating these related problems together in future studies.

About the Researchers

Dr. Micah Mazurek is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Psychology at the University of Missouri and a clinical child psychologist at the Thompson Center for Autism and Neurodevelopmental Disorders. She received her BA in Psychology from Yale University, and both her MA and PhD in Clinical Psychology from University of North Carolina. Her research interests include treatment outcomes, media use, and functioning in people with ASD.

Citation

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Autism, ASD, Therapy, Anxiety, Gastrointestinal problems, Sensory responsiveness

This research summary was written by Evguenia Ignatova for the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research. This research summary, along with other summaries, can be found on our [blog](#) and at asdmentalhealth.ca/research-summaries

About the Chair

The Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research is dedicated to studying ways to improve the mental health and well-being of people with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and their families in Canada.

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