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Adults With Autism More Likely To Have Co-Occurring Psychiatric And Medical Conditions

What is this research about?

While there has been some research on the health of children with ASD, very little is known about how common medical conditions are in adults with ASD. Past studies report that children and adolescents with ASD commonly have more medical and psychiatric conditions, such as depression, schizophrenia, sleep disorders, and gastrointestinal disorders. This study aimed to determine how common several conditions are among adults with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

The study sample included adults (over 18 years old), who were given ASD diagnoses on at least two separate occasions in their electronic medical records. Non-ASD 'control' patients were chosen from the same database and matched to ASD cases according to gender and age group (spanning 5 years ranges). Overall, there were 1507 cases with ASD and 15,070 control cases used. The researchers examined if certain medical or psychiatric conditions were more common in one group compared to the other.

What did the researchers find?

Most psychiatric and medical conditions were more common in adults with ASD. In fact, 54% of adults with ASD were diagnosed with a psychiatric condition, most commonly anxiety (29%), bipolar

What you need to know:

Adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) have higher rates of several psychiatric and chronic medical conditions compared to adults without ASD. In order to provide a better quality of life for adults with ASD, it is important to be aware of the conditions that they are at risk for, thus allowing for an early diagnosis and treatment of these conditions.

disorder (11%), depression (26%), attention deficit disorder (11%), obsessive-compulsive disorder (8%), and schizophrenia (8%). Compared to those without ASD, adults with ASD were more likely to have many of those conditions, including anxiety (3.7x), depression (2.9x) and schizophrenia (22x). Also, suicide attempts were five times more likely in those with ASD compared to those without ASD.

Regarding medical conditions, the adults with ASD were more likely to have hypertension (25.6% among patients with ASD vs 15.6%), autoimmune conditions (13.9% vs 10.8%), dyslipidemia (22.8% vs 15.1%), sleep disorders (17.6% vs 9.6%), and several other chronic medical conditions. However, those with ASD were less likely to display alcohol abuse/dependence, infections, genitourinary disorders, and have cancer. The researchers suggest these differences may be due to delayed diagnoses, genetics, medication use, and lack of supports, health education, and accommodations for social and language challenges.

How can you use this research?

It is important to understand the likelihood of developing psychiatric and medical conditions to ensure awareness and appropriate delivery of care. Early diagnoses can aid in the prevention or early treatment of the conditions. Future research can focus on understanding the mechanisms that lead to these increased risks in order to improve the quality of life for adults with ASD.

About the Researchers

Lisa Croen (PhD) is the director of the Autism Research Program and a scientist at the Division of Research, Kaiser Permanente Northern California.

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Steve Rich (MD) is the Chief of Family Medicine for Kaiser Permanente Santa Rosa.

Stephen Sidney (MD, MPH) is the Director of Research Clinics and a scientist with the Kaiser Permanente. Clarissa Kripke (MD) is a Professor of Family and Community Medicine and directs the Office of Developmental Primary Care.

Citation

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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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For more information, visit the Chair in Autism Spectrum Disorders Treatment and Care Research website at asdmentalhealth.ca

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