

research snapshot

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Factors Related to Taking Many Psychotropic Medications in Individuals with Autism

What is this research about?

Psychotropic medications are frequently used to treat mental health and behavioral issues in adolescents and adults with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). There are circumstances where psychotropic medication is necessary, but its use can be associated with a number of problematic side effects, such as weight gain, sedation and irritability. People are at an increased risk of developing problematic side effects when they use two or more medications at the same time; this is called polypharmacy. This study looked at factors contributing to psychotropic polypharmacy in adolescents and adults with ASD.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers surveyed 363 parents of adolescents and adults with ASD from across Ontario. Participants were recruited from ASD support agencies and advocacy groups, and from email lists associated with these organizations.

Individuals with ASD ranged in age from 12 to 30 years old (average age was 17 years old). Parents completed a questionnaire about their demographic information, their child's health and medication use, service use, and their level of caregiver burden and family distress. All participants had the option of completing their surveys online, by telephone interview, or on paper; most preferred online surveys.

What you need to know:

Individuals with ASD and a co-occurring psychiatric diagnosis, a history of hurting others, using therapy services, and with parents with high caregiver burden may be at increased risk for psychotropic polypharmacy.

It is important to support families of children with ASD prescribed multiple psychiatric medications.

What did the researcher find?

The researchers found that approximately one quarter of the sample was taking two or more psychotropic drugs at the same time. Individuals with psychotropic polypharmacy were 2.4 times more likely to have a psychiatric diagnosis in addition to having ASD and 2.7 times more likely to have a history of hurting others.

In terms of parent and system variables, individuals with psychotropic polypharmacy were 2.8 times more likely to have used therapy services, and 2.5 times more likely to have parents with high caregiver burden. The researchers note, however, that they used parent report and did not have supporting information for diagnoses and medication use.



How can you use this research?

Psychotropic polypharmacy in individuals with ASD may not simply be related to clinical variables, but rather an interplay between child, parent, and service factors. Identifying these risk factors may help in the development of alternative interventions to complement or replace pharmacological treatment options.

About the Researchers

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