

research snapshot

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A review of emergency department visits made by youth and adults with autism from the parent perspective

What is this research about?

Individuals with autism often visit the emergency department (ED) at higher rates than their peers who do not have autism. In order to improve the quality of care that individuals with autism receive during these encounters, this paper describes ED visits from the perspective of families.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers described the experiences of 46 adolescents and adults with autism who visited the ED over a one year period (a total of 49 ED visits). Descriptions of the 49 visits were collected as part of a larger survey of ED use in adolescents and adults with autism across Ontario. Families of 284 individuals with autism were recruited from autism support agencies and advocacy groups, and from email lists associated with these organizations. Families were contacted every two months over the course of a 1 year period to report on their child's planned and emergency service use. For this paper we focused on the subgroup of 46 participants whose families provided detailed descriptions of their child's ED visits.

What did the researcher find?

Of the 49 visits that were described, 31 visits were due to medical reasons (e.g., injury,

What you need to know:

Many adolescents and adults with autism visit the emergency department (ED). In this sample, visits were for both medical (63.3%) and psychiatric reasons (36.7%). Most parents reported being satisfied with the quality of care their child received in the ED.

gastrointestinal issues, infection) and 18 were due to psychiatric reasons (e.g., self-harm, danger to self and others). Injuries were the most common reason for medical visits and being a risk to one-self was the most common reason for psychiatric visits.

Most people were brought to the hospital by family members (59.2%) and in about half of the visits (51%) the individual with autism was taken to a separate, quiet place. Physical or chemical restraints were used in 15 visits (30.6%).

Most parents reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their visit (65.3%).

Parents were asked to provide recommendations for improving the quality of care that their family member with autism received in the ED. Parent's recommendations included specific accommodations for their child, greater empathy from ED staff and a need for more autism services at the hospital and in the community.



ASD
Mental Health

How can you use this research?

Individuals with autism visit the ED for different reasons. Although parents generally reported being satisfied with their child's experiences in the ED, specific attention should be paid to parent recommendations to improve the quality of care that individuals with autism receive in the ED.

About the Researchers

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Citation

Lunsky, Y., Tint, A., Weiss, J.A., Paulcka, A.M., & Bradley, E. (2018). A review of emergency department visits made by youth and adults with autism spectrum disorder from the parent perspective. *Advances in Autism*, 4(1), 10-18.

Keywords: autism, emergency department, hospital, mental health

This research summary was written by Melissa Paquette-Smith. This research was funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (MOP 102677). Dr. Weiss is supported by the Chair in ASD Treatment and Care Research (Canadian Institutes of Health Research RN162466-284208 in partnership with Autism Speaks Canada, the Canadian Autism Spectrum Disorders Alliance, Health Canada, Kids Brain Health Network (formerly NeuroDevNet) and the Sinneave Family Foundation.

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

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