

NEWS

Clinical research: Overall health a concern for autism

BY JESSICA WRIGHT

2 NOVEMBER 2011

Bodies at rest: Adults with autism tend to avoid vigorous activity, which can lead to long-term health complications.

Bodies at rest: Adults with autism tend to avoid vigorous activity, which can lead to long-term health complications.

Adults with autism are more likely than controls to have certain chronic health conditions, such as high cholesterol, but are less likely to treat these with prescription drugs, according to a study of 314 individuals, published in September in the *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*¹.

Although autism is generally diagnosed and described in children, it is a **lifelong disorder**. A California-based epidemiology study of about 13,000 individuals with autism showed that, between 1983 and 1998, this group had a higher death rate compared with the general population². Another study based in Denmark showed similar results³. These findings suggest that factors associated with autism could affect the general health of individuals with the disorder.

For instance, monitoring physical activity using a wearable device shows that older children with autism are less active than younger ones, according to a study published 18 October in *BMC Research Notes*. This may be because individuals with autism become less active as they get older, the researchers suggest⁴. Restricted interests, a core feature of autism, often lead to picky eating habits and **limited intake of vitamins and nutrients**.

Individuals with autism are also less likely than those in the general population to be treated for health complications, according to the new study. This may be in part because many individuals with autism have deficits in language and **self-awareness** and cannot describe relevant symptoms to their doctors.

The researchers looked at the electronic health records of 108 adults with autism, on average 29 years old, compared with 206 controls matched by age, gender, race and type of health insurance. Researchers collected this information as part of a larger analysis of 1,200 individuals with intellectual disability treated at the Cleveland Clinic.

Adults with autism are twice as likely to have high cholesterol, about four times as likely to be constipated and about nine times as likely to have epilepsy as are controls, the study found. The high incidence of elevated cholesterol could be because some medications prescribed for individuals with autism lower metabolism, the researchers say.

Individuals with autism are also half as likely as controls to be diagnosed with asthma, perhaps because the diagnostic tests are fairly involved, the researchers say.

As would be expected, individuals with autism are about twice as likely as controls to take antidepressants and anti-anxiety medications and three times as likely to take antipsychotics.

However, although as many individuals with autism as controls have high blood pressure, about 70 percent of them treat the condition with drugs compared with 95 percent of controls. Similarly, about 38 percent of individuals with autism and high cholesterol take cholesterol-lowering drugs compared with 53 percent of controls.

One caveat of the study is that it includes only individuals with autism who see a primary care physician as opposed to a specialist.

References:

1: Tyler C.V. et al *Am. J. Intellect. Dev. Disabil.* **116**, 371-380 (2011) [PubMed](#)

2: Shavelle R.M. et al. *J. Autism Dev. Disord.* **31**, 569-576 (2001) [PubMed](#)

3: Mouridsen S.E. et al. *Autism* **12**, 403-414 (2008) [PubMed](#)

4: Macdonald M. *et al. BMC Res. Notes* **18**: 422 (2011) **PubMed**