

NEWS

# Few autism researchers plan to attend conferences in person this year: Survey

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Today is the **last day of advance registration** for the annual meeting of the Society for Neuroscience (SfN), scheduled to take place both virtually and in person in Chicago, Illinois, in November.

For many autism researchers, though, the decision to attend, or not, was finalized months ago. The deadline to submit an abstract to the meeting, the largest annual gathering of neuroscientists in the world, was in July — just as the highly contagious delta variant of the coronavirus started to drive COVID-19 cases up again across the United States.

That timing gave pause to **Audrey Brumback**, assistant professor of neurology at the University of Texas at Austin. “It was just sort of hard to envision going and spending time with 30,000 of my best international friends,” she says.

Brumback and the members of her lab typically attend SfN, and she is eager to resume in-person meetings, she says, where spontaneous conversations and networking happen more easily. But she ultimately decided to not submit any abstracts for SfN and instead to attend a few smaller meetings over the next few months.

Smaller meetings offer a better chance of bumping into friends and colleagues, Brumback says, “as opposed to SfN this year, where who knows who’s actually going to go?” (SfN representatives declined to comment on the expected number of in-person attendees.)

Brumback is not alone in her hesitation. *Spectrum* surveyed autism researchers about their conference plans through the end of the year. Of the 138 who responded, 29 said they plan to attend SfN, but only 10 expect to do so in person. Of the 109 who are not planning to attend SfN, 64 said they are not attending any other conferences either. Most cited the pandemic as the driver of their decision, although some said that they never attend SfN, or that they faced travel and

financial restrictions this year.

Based on the survey and follow-up interviews, it's unclear when autism researchers will be ready or, in some cases, able to return to conference halls en masse. After more than 18 months of virtual meetings, though, many are seeking and finding new ways to connect and share their work.

"I'm very optimistic that people who are grad students now or postdocs will be able to deal with permanent changes — Zoom meetings and virtual conferences and all that. They will be able to figure out how to get the best out of it," says **Ralph-Axel Müller**, professor of psychology at San Diego State University in California. "Ultimately, it'll probably be a good thing."

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