

NEWS

Polypharmacy, shifting prescriptions common for autism comorbidities

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1 JULY 2021

People with autism **frequently switch medications** to treat common co-occurring conditions, such as anxiety and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), according to a new study.

About 30 percent of autistic people take three or more psychotropic drugs simultaneously to manage those comorbidities, the study shows — a percentage **two times higher** than a 2013 analysis found.

“We were very surprised by the wide spectrum, and number of drugs, that are being used to treat the same comorbidity conditions, and how often those were changed in patients,” says **Paul Avillach**, assistant professor of biomedical informatics at Harvard Medical School, who led the study.

Guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics urge clinicians to **treat autistic children** with behavioral therapies, where possible. Relatively few children with autism **receive recommended behavioral therapies**, though, and they commonly take medications to **manage comorbidities**.

The new work analyzed insurance claims and filled-prescription records from a large health insurance company in the United States. It included data from roughly 27,000 people with autism who had been enrolled in the plan for at least one year and had been prescribed at least one medication for a comorbidity. About 78 percent of the participants were male and the average age was 14 years.

“You can't hide from your bills,” Avillach says. “Every single time a patient was on a drug and reimbursed for the drug, this information was captured.”

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