

NEWS

Takeaways from INSAR 2019

BY CLAIRE CAMERON

6 MAY 2019



The 18th annual meeting of the **International Society for Autism Research** has drawn to a close. The conference brought together a diverse set of autism researchers from around the world to share their results, exchange ideas and spark new collaborations.

Spectrum's reporters were there, too, covering many of the presentations. You can catch up on our coverage [here](#).

A few themes emerged from the myriad sessions, posters and panels.

The genetic basis of autism extends beyond high-confidence risk genes. For example, evidence is accumulating that person's **genetic background** can moderate or enhance the impact of autism mutations. Researchers also reported early inklings of the **genetics of sleep problems** in people with autism.

"[These presentations] highlighted how prevalent [sleep] problems are and how much they affect the quality of life of individuals and caregivers, but also how far we still are from the genetic underpinnings and underlying mechanisms," says **Lucia Peixoto**, assistant professor of biomedical sciences at Washington State University Spokane.

And yet, genetics is not omnipotent. A twin study showed that genetics cannot account for the severity of a child's autism traits, pointing to a contribution from the **early environment**.

Another theme centered on how autism traits and risk factors can shift over time. Long-term studies of the condition have revealed the timing of early communication problems as well as changes in **repetitive behaviors** with age.

Health and safety:

Important findings about **suicide** and self-injury also surfaced. **Suicide** is a leading cause of death among people on the spectrum — making identification of its warning signs a top priority. About 10 percent of autistic children **contemplate suicide**, one study suggests. Another indicates that **self-injury is a predictor** of suicidality in children with autism.

Sarah Cassidy, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Nottingham in the United Kingdom, flagged 10 questions for future work in her presentation on Friday:

The top ten priorities for preventing suicide in autistic people, in partnership with allies.
Fantastic session today at **#INSAR2019** pic.twitter.com/aZgid5mvBB

— Calliope Holingue (@calliopeholing) **May 3, 2019**

A panel of scientists and advocates commissioned by *The Lancet* met for the first time on Saturday afternoon to discuss how to **improve healthcare for autistic people**. It provided a timely example of autism researchers' efforts to put their findings to clinical use.

This year, the meeting's organizers made a concerted effort to boost the number of **basic science sessions**. In the end, there seemed to be something for everyone. We asked some scientists to tell us about the presentations that caught their attention. You can read their responses **here**.

We'll be back next year in Seattle. Until then, you can stay up to date with the latest stories from *Spectrum* by signing up for our **daily or weekly newsletter**. You can also follow us on **Facebook** and **Twitter** for timely updates.