

OPINION

New model mice

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A new mouse model of autism shows many of the symptoms associated with autism, including problems socializing with peers and repetitive behavior, according to a new study published in the March issue of *Behavioral Brain Research*.

This is the third new mouse model since September which, to my mind, indicates that research on the genetics of autism is steadily ? albeit slowly ? progressing.

The **previous models** were based on mice that lacked either neuroligin-3 or neuroligin-4, members of a family of proteins needed for neurons to communicate across synapses.

These latest mice lack a gene called GABRB3, which codes for a protein important in brain development and has been linked before to autism.

Apart from the social problems and repetitive behavior, these mice also show little interest in other mice that are strangers to them or in unknown objects, and are unable to shift their attention from one target to another.

The Stanford University researchers say the mice are hyperactive, and run in tight circles, which is reminiscent of some of the repetitive behavior seen in children with autism.

The mice also have smaller 'cerebellar vermis,' a brain region associated with the ability to shift attention, and thought to be similarly smaller in children with autism.

The fact that all these new mouse models show autism-like symptoms hints at how heterogenous the disorder is. No doubt this year will see the revelation of many more such 'autistic' mice.