



Autism Disorders

By Leah Oliver and Alissa Johnson

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Autism, a developmental disability that affects the functioning of the brain, typically appears during early childhood. The diagnosis of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) in the United States is becoming an increasingly common occurrence. Public health officials, researchers, state and federal policymakers, and consumers have mobilized resources in an effort to understand and ultimately reverse this disturbing trend.

Autism Spectrum Disorders are a group of developmental disabilities caused by an abnormality in the brain.

What are ASDs? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) as a group of developmental disabilities that are caused by an abnormality in the brain leading to problems with social and communication skills. ASDs include autism, Asperger's Syndrome and "pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified" (PDD NOS). According to the CDC, many young children with ASDs do not speak. Other symptoms may include engaging in repetitive behaviors and difficulty in social situations. A recent study by the CDC found that approximately 6 percent of children with autism also suffer from a major birth defect, such as abnormalities of the central nervous system and Down Syndrome.

Barriers to Reducing Autism Rates. Although people with ASDs may have similar capabilities or impairments, the severity of symptoms may vary widely among individuals. As a result, health care professionals may have difficulty identifying patients with ASDs. This may complicate attempts to track autism rates. According to CDC estimates, ASDs occur in one in every 166 people. More than 0.5 million people in the United States today have ASDs.

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The cause of autism also remains a mystery. ASDs may be attributed to a complex mix of genetic and environmental factors. Though causes of autism are not well-understood, theories abound. In particular, the notion that the combined measles/mumps/rubella vaccine or other vaccines with mercury-based preservatives, like thimerosal, may result in autism has received considerable attention in recent years; however, major medical institutions like the Institute of Medicine and the CDC have stated that the science does not support a link. Nonetheless, mercury has been eliminated in all childhood vaccines, except for the influenza vaccine.

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State Action

All 50 states have laws related to autism, which vary in scope and subject. Some include autism in the definition of "disability" or "developmental disability." Others have created centers, councils, pilot programs, commissions or institutes for the study of autism and to serve as a resource and training facility for professionals who work with people with autism. At least eight states—California, Louisiana, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, South Carolina

and Virginia—require insurers to offer or provide coverage for autism diagnosis or treatment.

Special Education. Autism also affects special education. Although children with autism account for a relatively small number of students served, the percentage with the disorder has increased dramatically. From 1991 to 2001, the number of school-age children with autism has jumped 1,354 percent. State legislators may be particularly interested in the climbing numbers of children with autism in light of the fact that special education services cost about \$77 billion annually, accounting for 22 percent of all spending for K-12 education.

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To determine the potential causes of autism, efforts are in progress to create autism registries and surveillance programs. Public health officials are particularly interested in the surge in autism rates in Silicon Valley, Calif. and Brick Township, N.J. Last year, West Virginia became the first state to track the rate of ASDs statewide through the creation of an autism registry. Physicians must report all diagnosed cases to the registry, which is maintained by the West Virginia Autism Training Center. The center works in conjunction with the state birth defects registry. Created by the Legislature in 1983, the center also oversees training of school autism mentors to handle the special needs of children in the classroom.

Federal Action

Resources from the federal government are available to assist concerned communities, families and caregivers as they support children with ASDs.

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- Children with autism who are eligible for Medicaid may receive services through the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis & Treatment program.
- The CDC supports efforts to monitor autism and research to find its causes. Currently, CDC funds autism tracking efforts in 18 states. This will help identify trends, determine whether the condition is more common in certain groups, and may highlight important clues to direct future research. The agency also is launching a campaign to improve early detection and intervention for children with autism and related disabilities.
- The Environmental Protection Agency and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences are involved in local autism research projects. They fund children's environmental health research centers that examine environmental causes of diseases in children. Centers in California, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, Ohio and Washington concentrate their activities on autism research.

Although tracking and researching the roots of autism offers hope for the future, many Americans live with autism on a daily basis. As the growing number of children diagnosed with autism mature, policymakers may want to take action in anticipation of the corresponding demand for special services geared toward adults.

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