Adults With Autism Have Higher Rate of Chronic Health Problems

Those with the condition are more likely to suffer from low blood pressure, asthma, diabetes and heart conditions.

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People with autism tend to die at a younger age than those without the disorder. Now, a new study published in the journal Autism investigates why people with autism are more likely to develop chronic conditions involving the heart and lungs as well as diabetes, reports the University of Cambridge in England.

For the study, 1,156 adults with autism and 1,212 adults without the disorder answered questions in an anonymous online survey about their lifestyle choices, daily habits and medical history. Findings showed that adults with autism were 1.5 to 4.3 times more likely to experience illnesses such as low blood pressure, asthma, prediabetes and arrhythmias (abnormal heartbeat).

Researchers also examined for the first time how smoking, alcohol use and body mass index influenced these adults' chronic health problems. Interestingly, results revealed that compared with individuals in the general population, these lifestyle factors didn't affect the health of adults living with autism.

Scientists also closely examined the experiences of female respondents and older adults with autism. Their findings suggested that these women had a greater likelihood of reporting increased risks of physical health problems than men with autism. Furthermore, women with autism were 4.3 times more likely to have prediabetes than women without the condition. However, the risk was equal for men with and without autism, leading researchers to conclude that treatments for people with autism must be individually tailored for them.

According to Elizabeth Weir, a PhD student who led the study, researchers should begin to concentrate on other biological (genetic, hormonal, etc.); environmental; lifestyle, such as diet, exercise and sleep; and health-care-related factors that may be contributing to the health disparities among people with autism.

"This new study highlights the physical health risks to autistic individuals and has important implications for their health care," said Simon Baron-Cohen, director of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge and one of the study's investigators. "Understanding the reasons why these

disparities exist will allow us to better support autistic individuals and improve the quality and length of their lives."

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