

# Why autism spectrum disorder is increasing

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The autism spectrum or autistic spectrum describes a range of conditions classified as pervasive developmental disorders in *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. The pervasive developmental disorders include autism, Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified, childhood disintegrative disorder, and Rett syndrome. These disorders are typically characterized by a social deficit, communication difficulties, stereotyped or repetitive behaviors and interest, and in some cases, cognitive delays.

The historical rate of autism is about 4 per 10 000 individuals. Recent estimates for all pervasive developmental disorders are in the range of 15–20 per 10 000 (30–60 per 10 000), of which autism is one type [1].

The reason for the increased incidence of autism spectrum disorder is not clear.

However, some of the reasons could be:

- (1) Greater awareness of doctors, teachers, and parents.
- (2) Pregnancy and birth factors:
  - (a) Preterm delivery.
  - (b) Low birth weight.
  - (c) Multiple births.
  - (d) Breach presentation.
  - (e) In-vitro fertilization and other assisted reproductive technologies.
  - (f) Maternal and paternal age over 30 years.
  - (g) Maternal gestational diabetes.
  - (h) Bleeding after the first trimester.
  - (i) Presence of meconium in the amniotic fluid [2].

- (3) Change in referral patterns and widening of diagnostic criteria for typical autism.
- (4) Vaccine controversy: The measles–mumps–rubella (MMR) vaccine may cause brain damage by itself or by means of thimerosal, which is a stabilizer for the vaccine and is composed of 50% ethyl mercury. However, there is no convincing evidence, and the rate of autism continues to climb despite elimination of thimerosal from routine vaccines [3]. It has been suggested that sibs of autistic children should postpone having their MMR vaccine after the age of 18 months.

Data tell us with certainty that more children are being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders than ever before and that these children and their families need help.

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## Acknowledgements

### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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