

Largest study to investigate risk factors of autism to begin enrolling families

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Researchers from Kaiser Permanente and the California Department of Public Health, as well as from five other sites nationwide, today will begin enrolling families in the largest study to date investigating the genetic and environmental factors that may cause autism and other developmental disabilities.

The five-year research study, called the Study to Explore Early Development, will involve 2,700 children and their parents from six areas around the nation, including Santa Clara and Alameda counties. The study is open to both Kaiser Permanente members and non-members with children who were born from September 2003 to August 2005 in Santa Clara and Alameda counties. Children with autism and other neuro-developmental impairments (developmental delays), as well as children with typical development, will be studied and are being recruited.

“We hope this study will help us learn more about the factors that may lead to autism and other developmental disabilities, and how genes and the environment may affect child development,” said Lisa A. Croen, PhD, the study’s local principal investigator and an epidemiologist with Kaiser Permanente’s Division of Research in Oakland, Calif. “The results may also contribute to better services and treatments for affected children and to prevention strategies.”

For reasons not fully understood, autism is on the rise, affecting on average about one in 150 children born in the United States, according to

the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which also is involved in this study. The chronic, lifelong condition affects the normal functioning of the brain, impacting development of social and communication skills. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently released guidelines recommending all children be screened for autism between the ages of 18 and 24 months, even if parents haven't expressed any particular concerns.

“The new national recommendation for regular screening of children for autism has raised the community awareness of the importance of early diagnosis of autism in order to help children and families,” said Dr. Marc Lerner, MD, FAAP, the American Academy of Pediatrics' Chair of State Government Affairs for California. “What is now needed is research like the SEED study to understand the reasons behind the dramatic growth in the diagnosis of autism, which will help us to address prevention and treatment.”

Factors that will be studied include family medical history; genetics; and socio-demographic, lifestyle and environmental factors. Study information will be obtained by conducting interviews and exams, reviewing medical records, collecting cheek swabs, and blood and hair sampling, according to Pilar Bernal, MD, medical director of Kaiser Permanente's Regional Program for Autism Spectrum Disorders. Kaiser Permanente maintains two autism centers – one in San Jose, Calif., and another in Rancho Cordova, Calif., a suburb of Sacramento.

Source: Kaiser Permanente Division of Research

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