

Are schizophrenia and autism close relations?

October 23 2012

(Medical Xpress)—Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), a category that includes autism, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder, are characterized by difficulty with social interaction and communication, or repetitive behaviors. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Management says that one in 88 children in the US is somewhere on the Autism spectrum—an alarming ten-fold increase in the last four decades.

New research by Dr. Mark Weiser of Tel Aviv University's Sackler Faculty of Medicine and the Sheba Medical Center has revealed that ASD appears share a root cause with other [mental illnesses](#), including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. At first glance, schizophrenia and autism may look like completely different illnesses, he says. But closer inspection reveals many common traits, including social and [cognitive dysfunction](#) and a decreased ability to lead normal lives and function in the real world.

Studying extensive databases in Israel and Sweden, the researchers discovered that the two illnesses had a genetic link, representing a heightened risk within families. They found that people who have a schizophrenic sibling are 12 times more likely to have autism than those with no schizophrenia in the family. The presence of bipolar disorder in a sibling showed a similar pattern of association, but to a lesser degree.

A scientific leap forward, this study sheds new light on the genetics of these disorders. The results will help scientists better understand the

genetics of mental illness, says Dr. Weiser, and may prove to be a fruitful direction for future research. The findings have been published in the [Archives of General Psychiatry](#).

All in the family

Researchers used three data sets, one in Israel and two in Sweden, to determine the familial connection between schizophrenia and autism. The Israeli database alone, used under the auspices of the ethics committees of both the Sheba Medical Center and the Israeli Defense Forces, included anonymous information about more than a million soldiers, including patients with schizophrenia and ASD.

"We found the same results in all three data sets," he says, noting that the ability to replicate the findings across these extensive databases is what makes this study so significant.

Understanding this genetic connection could be a missing link, Dr. Weiser says, and provides a fresh direction for study. The researchers are now taking this research in a clinical direction. For now, though, the findings shouldn't influence the way that doctors treat patients with either illness, he adds.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

Citation: Are schizophrenia and autism close relations? (2012, October 23) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-10-schizophrenia-autism.html>

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