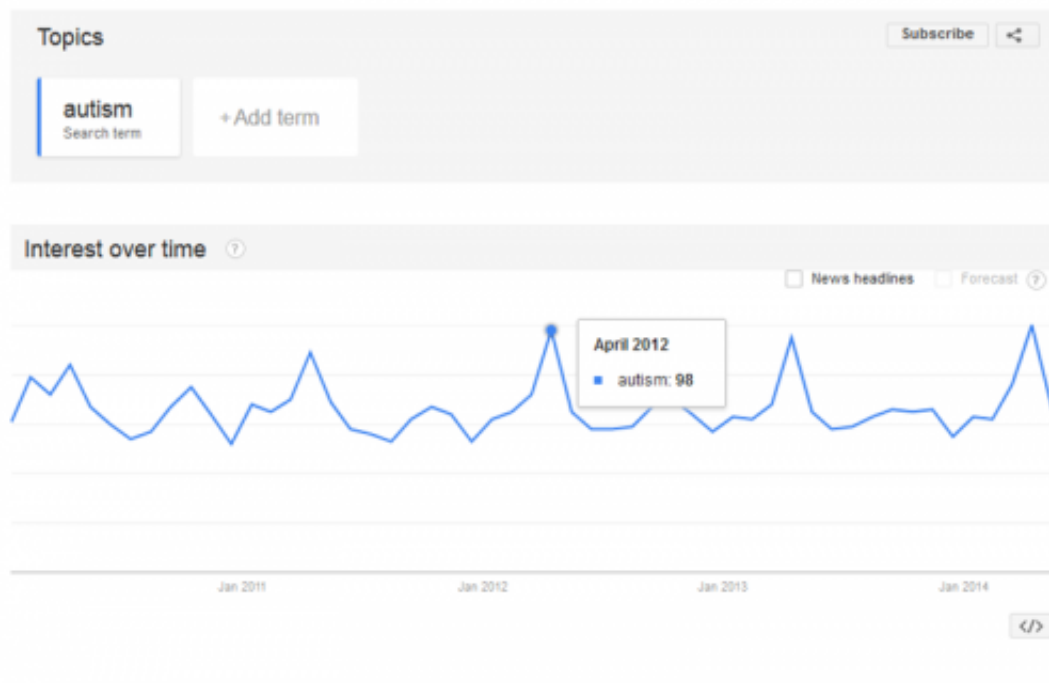


Awareness month spurs web searches for autism

June 26 2014



Google search trends for the term "autism" from 2010 through 2014, showing peaks in searches in April of each year and smaller peaks in the fall

Autism Awareness Month each April brings blue lights and puzzle shapes out to shine in many communities – but does it actually lead to increased autism awareness? According to a new analysis of web search trends by researchers at Drexel University, it does appear to drive an increase in Google searches for autism – by a third over searches in

March in recent years.

Brian K. Lee, PhD, an assistant professor in the Drexel University School of Public Health and research fellow of the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, was senior author of the study with public health doctoral student Elizabeth DeVilbiss, published early online this month in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*.

Using the Google trends tool (google.com/trends), they analyzed web [search](#) queries for the terms "[autism](#)" and "Asperger's" from January 2004 through April 2014 in the United States. They also compared these trends with searches for "ADHD" to assess the possible influence of broader trends in public interest in mental health issues of special interest to younger populations.

Each April, from 2004 through 2014 (except 2005), web search interest in autism spiked – up by an average of 26 percent between March and April, followed by an average decrease by 24 percent between April and May. Even sharper April spikes have occurred from 2007 through 2014, with the average March-April increase at 33 percent in those years.

A secondary, smaller increase in "autism" searches occurred each fall. Similar spring and fall oscillations occurred in searches for "ADHD" but without the sharp spike observed in April for "autism." The spring and fall oscillations may reflect a rebound in web searches in general, which tend to drop off in summer and winter, Lee said.

The overall search interest in "autism" was sustained but not increasing over the ten-year span the researchers analyzed. In contrast, "Asperger's" searches had a long-term increasing trend, with the term's popularity overall 255 percent higher in January 2014 in comparison to January 2004.

Lee and DeVelbiss pointed out a few additional spikes in the search trends that may correspond to high-impact media coverage of autism and Asperger's disorder outside of the April awareness campaigns. The Google trends tool allows users to overlay related news headlines for search terms alongside the trend chart. Lee warned that conclusions about the correlation of news headlines to search trends should be considered with caution because many could be simply accidental correlations. However, three non-April spikes were of particular note:

- In September 2007, the largest monthly increase (80 percent) in searches for "autism" during the 2004-2014 span occurred. In this month, The Oprah Winfrey Show aired a high-profile segment on September 18 featuring Jenny McCarthy and Holly Robinson Peete discussing their sons with autism.
- In February 2005, another peak in "autism" searches occurred, correlating with a 10-part series on autism on The Today Show, February 21-25, 2005.
- In December 2012, searches for "Asperger's" increased by 122 percent over November 2012. This increase corresponded with heavy publicity regarding the planned elimination of Asperger's as a standalone diagnosis in the DSM-V.

Autism is not the only condition for which awareness months have been linked to increased search activity. A 2011 [study](#) in BMC Cancer reported that searches for breast cancer increased each October during Breast Cancer Awareness Month between 2004 and 2009, but much lower search activity occurred for prostate and lung cancers during their respective awareness months. Search activity is also far from the entire picture of creating awareness of autism and other conditions. Whether useful and accessible information is available as a result of that search is important.

"Whether increased awareness is meaningful is another question," Lee

said. "When a parent performs a [web search](#), does it lead to recognition of autism in their child? Does it lead to seeking clinical testing and services?" Search trends can't answer those questions, but can provide a glimpse of public interest in a topic.

More information: *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10803-014-2160-4

Provided by Drexel University

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