

Review examines nutritional issues related to autism spectrum disorder

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About 1 in 88 children has an autism spectrum disorder. This represents a 78% increase in the incidence of autism spectrum disorder since 2002 (although some of the increase may be due to improved diagnostic capabilities). Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder may have poor nutrition because they often exhibit selective eating patterns as well as sensory sensitivity that predispose them to restrict their diets.

The July 2015 issue of *Advances in Nutrition*, the international review journal of the American Society for Nutrition, features "Nutritional Status of Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Do We Know Enough?" This article evaluates the latest scientific studies examining nutritional status and nutritional needs of individuals dealing with these complex behavioral disorders.

The authors of the article examine a number of early warning signs that nutrition scientists have discovered that may alert parents as well as health care providers to the possibility of an autism spectrum disorder. For example, they discuss research suggesting that lower folate, vitamin B-6, and vitamin B-12 concentrations could be possible biomarkers for earlier diagnosis of autism spectrum disorders. In addition, the authors point to abnormally accelerated growth rates in infants and [children](#) as a signal of autism.

Individuals with an autism spectrum disorder may be malnourished due to selective eating patterns, limited food repertoire, fear of eating new or unfamiliar foods, hypersensitivity, and other mealtime behavior issues.

As a result they may require nutritional supplements or fortified foods to ensure that they fully meet dietary guidelines.

Although not all research findings are consistent, studies do indicate that children with an autism spectrum disorder are more likely to be overweight or obese. Unusual dietary patterns as well as decreased opportunities for physical activity may be contributory factors. Interestingly, the authors also point to studies indicating that individuals with an autism spectrum disorder are also more likely to be underweight than the general population. It appears that their unusual dietary patterns can lead to overweight and obesity as well as underweight.

Given the steep rise in the prevalence of individuals with autism spectrum disorders coupled with their higher mortality rates, the authors point to "enormous public health implications." They call for more research to help diagnose autism spectrum disorders as early as possible and to develop effective nutritional strategies that enable individuals with an autism spectrum disorder to live healthier lives.

In addition, the authors also note that most nutrition research has focused on the needs of children with autism spectrum disorders. With the number of middle-aged and elderly people with [autism spectrum disorders](#) growing, the authors stress the need for research to focus on the nutritional needs of these adult populations as well.

Provided by American Society for Nutrition

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