

Autistic adults have a higher rate of physical health conditions

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Autistic individuals are more likely to have chronic physical health conditions, particularly heart, lung, and diabetic conditions, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Cambridge. The results

are published in the journal *Autism*.

Earlier research has shown that autistic people on average die younger than others and that this may be, in part, due to chronic physical [health](#) conditions. Previous studies have also shown that autistic people are at higher risk of a variety of health conditions, but we don't know what is driving these increased risks. Thus, better understanding of the physical health of autistic adults may help us improve both their quality and length of life.

1,156 autistic individuals and 1,212 non-autistic individuals took part in an anonymous, online survey developed by the team about their lifestyle choices and daily habits, personal and family medical history. The results indicate that autistic individuals are 1.5 to 4.3 times as likely to have a wide variety of health conditions, including [low blood pressure](#), arrhythmias, asthma, and prediabetes.

This new study is also the first to examine the influence of smoking, alcohol use, and BMI. Surprisingly, the results show that these lifestyle factors (which increase risk of chronic physical health problems in the [general population](#)) do not account for the heightened risk of heart, lung, and [diabetic conditions](#) seen among autistic adults.

The study also explored the experiences of female respondents and of older adults, both of whom remain understudied groups. The results revealed that autistic females, even more so than autistic males, carry increased risk of physical health conditions. In addition, the types of conditions of risk depend on the person's biological sex. For example, autistic females are 4.3 times more likely to have prediabetes than non-autistic females; however, autistic and non-autistic males are equally likely to have prediabetes. These results suggest that a "one size fits all" approach to the healthcare of [autistic people](#) may not be effective.

Elizabeth Weir, the Ph.D. student who led the study, said, "This is a first step in better understanding why autistic individuals are so much more likely to have chronic physical health problems. While smoking, alcohol, and BMI may play a role, we now need to focus on what other biological, environmental, lifestyle or healthcare-related factors are contributing to these health disparities."

Professor Simon Baron-Cohen, Director of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge, who was part of the team, commented, "This new study highlights the physical health risks to autistic individuals, and has important implications for their healthcare. Understanding the reasons why these disparities exist will allow us to better support [autistic individuals](#) and improve the quality and length of their lives."

More information: Elizabeth Weir et al, Increased prevalence of non-communicable physical health conditions among autistic adults, *Autism* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/1362361320953652](https://doi.org/10.1177/1362361320953652)

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