

Study suggests prenatal diet may play a role in autism

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A small team of public health specialists from the University of Glasgow and the Norwegian Institute of Public Health reports a possible link between some cases of autism and prenatal diet.

In their study, [published](#) in *JAMA Network Open*, the group analyzed information in two large databases of medical information on thousands of mothers and daughters in Norway and England.

Prior research has suggested that there appears to be diet, genetic and [environmental factors](#) involved in the development of [autism](#) in children while they are still in the womb, though the exact cause is still unknown. For this new study, the research team looked more closely at the role of diet in its development.

The researchers analyzed patient information from two large databases: the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children and the Norwegian Mother, Father, and Child Cohort Study. The researchers looked at data for the years 2002 through 2008 and 1990 through 1992, which included data for children up to age 8. In all, they analyzed data for more than 95,000 mother/daughter pairs.

As part of their analysis, the researchers found a pattern—women who adhered to a "healthy diet" have a 22% lower chance of delivering a child with autism than women who ate a less-than-healthy diet.

In their work, they defined a healthy diet as one that included regular servings of vegetables, fruits, nuts, fish and whole grains, and excluded foods high in fat, processed meats, [soft drinks](#) and refined carbohydrates.

They also found that children born to mothers who regularly ate a [healthy diet](#) while pregnant were 24% less likely to develop social and/or [communication problems](#) irrespective of autism. The researchers noted that the association in both cases was stronger in mother/daughter pairs than in mother/son pairs.

The research team points out that the study does not explain why women

eating a healthier diet may reduce their risk of having an autistic child, though they theorize that it might have something to do with how foods affect DNA or the immune process. They also note that their data was not able to show whether the impact of diet was causal in nature or due to other factors.

More information: Catherine Friel et al, Healthy Prenatal Dietary Pattern and Offspring Autism, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.22815](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.22815)

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