

Developing Concerns: Detecting Autism Early

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According to the most recent CDC monitoring data, **autism has a current prevalence of 2.1% of US children at age 8.** Although autism can be reliably diagnosed in children as young as 18 months, the median age at autism diagnosis in the US is 49 months.

Understanding factors associated with early autism identification is essential, as **early intervention can significantly improve out-comes for autistic individuals.**



Families with an autistic child want to know the likelihood that subsequent children will also be affected so that they can better prepare for and support that child or even decide whether to have another child. They will ask their pediatrician about the recurrence risk, and it is important to be able to respond with the newest data.

While many researchers have identified common situations that increase autism very slightly (eg advanced paternal age), two recent studies can help pediatricians to identify children at greatest risk for autism.

The first study was recently published by Pokoski et al (JAMA Pediatrics .doi:10.1001/jamapediatrics.2025.0216) which investigated the prevalence of motor delays in the development of children later found to have autism. They found that motor milestone delays were present in **71.5% of the 32,850 children who were identified to have autism at age 8 by active surveillance.** In fact, the children with motor milestone delays were evaluated for autism earlier than the children without delays (43.6 months versus 51.22 months). This provides evidence for pediatricians that in children with motor milestone delay, it is important to evaluate the other areas of developmental functioning to determine whether an autism evaluation might be appropriate. This is in addition to a referral for Early Intervention, of course.

The second study published by Ozonoff et al (Pediatrics 2024; 154(2):e2023065297) followed 1605 infants until age 3 across 18 US sites who had an older sibling with autism. They found that a total of 20.2% of siblings developed autism, which is similar to the reported recurrence risk of 18.7% in 2011. In addition, even higher rates of recurrence occurred when there were more than one sibling with autism and if the sibling with autism was female. This means that autism is about 10 times higher in children with a sibling with autism. Pediatricians therefore should closely monitor siblings of children with autism and promptly refer for a diagnostic evaluation and early intervention as soon as developmental delays are noted.

Early intervention in California for children 0-3 years is provided through the Regional Center system. When you make a referral, the Regional Center has 45 calendar days to conduct an evaluation and determine whether the child is eligible for early intervention. This evaluation is free, and may even be conducted in the family home. Therefore pediatricians play an important role in early identification of children at risk for autism.



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