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Special Report:
National Autism Awareness Month

News, Hope, and Inspiration

The latest research provides fresh insight and ideas for action

BY RACHEL RABKIN PECHMAN

RECENT NEWS about the growing number of children with autism may be unsettling for some parents, but there is also reason for optimism. According to estimates by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), about 1 in 110 children have autism spectrum disorder (ASD). That's up from the 2007 estimate of 1 in 150 children, but at the same time, researchers may be getting closer to identifying the cause of the disorder, and new therapies are advancing. To learn more, and in observance of National Autism Awareness Month, we spoke with Dan Coury, M.D., professor of pediatrics and psychiatry at Ohio State University and medical director for the Autism Treatment Network, funded by Autism Speaks, the country's largest autism science and advocacy organization.

PARENT & CHILD: *What's behind the increase in the number of kids with ASD as measured by the CDC?*

DR. DAN COURY: It's unclear. It may be that due to updated reclassification methods, children who were previously labeled learning disabled or mentally retarded are now being placed on the autism spectrum. But we can't



completely rule out the fact that there may be something else going on that's driving up the numbers. The concern is that there are environmental factors that are triggering ASD.

P&C: *What environmental factors are researchers investigating?*

DR. COURY: Heavy metals such as mercury in the environment, chemicals in plastics, and pesticides that weren't being used 20 years ago. For example, a very high percentage of women are carrying trace amounts of pesticides in their bodies now, which, coupled with a genetic tendency or vulnerability, could help explain why we are seeing more autism. But it's very hard to pinpoint an environmental trigger, and there hasn't been extensive research yet. So far there isn't a lot of evidence to support the notion that these things are causing ASD, but this difficult research is being done in centers across the country and could lead to avenues of prevention and treatment down the line. If you're concerned, you could consider trying to avoid products with chemicals that are not naturally occurring, such as Bisphenol A (BPA) and phthalates. Many plastic bottles and cups are now being made without them.

P&C: *What can you tell parents who are anxious about vaccines given the controversy about a potential link to autism?*

DR. COURY: A lot of excellent research has been done over the last decade

CHARLY FRANKLIN/PHOTOGRAPHER'S CHOICE/GETTY IMAGES (RM)

showing that vaccines containing thimerosal [a mercury-based preservative] do not cause autism. Some rare cases have suggested that in children with a previous tendency for ASD, a vaccine, which causes your body to mount an immunological response, might have triggered ASD. Some researchers are looking at cases like that, but they're rare. There are many more proven life-saving benefits to vaccination than there is evidence supporting its link to autism.

P&C: *What would you say to parents who want to space out their children's vaccines with an eye toward minimizing side effects?*

DR. COURY: If spacing out vaccines makes parents more comfortable, they should discuss it with their pediatrician.

P&C: *In an effort to understand what might cause autism, some people have focused on gastrointestinal (GI) disorders. Can you explain this?*

DR. COURY: There's nothing to show that GI disorders cause autism but we have seen a lot of autistic children with GI conditions. We're not sure if there is a higher percentage of GI problems in ASD children than in other children, but we do know that the discomfort of GI symptoms seems to contribute to autistic behaviors such as self-injury and outbursts. There is still a lot we don't know, but research is showing that the gastrointestinal issues may be part of a larger collection of ASD symptoms for some—but not all—autistic children.

P&C: *What are the latest promising treatments for autism?*

DR. COURY: The best-proven treatment is intensive applied behavior analysis or ABA treatment [a teaching method in which therapists break skills down into small steps for an autistic child and provide praise and rewards to motivate the child, with the goal of improving social behavior]. Beyond that there are some medications that are used to treat symptoms of autism (not the underlying disorder)—irritability and difficulty transitioning between activities, for instance.

P&C: *What should parents do if they are concerned their child has autism?*

DR. COURY: It's important to keep in mind that there's a wide range of



MEET THE PEETES

My Brother Charlie is a fictional picture book written by actress and autism advocate Holly Robinson Peete (top right) along with her 12-year-old daughter, Ryan. The book is based on Ryan's experiences living with her twin brother, R.J., who has autism. The pair wrote this heartwarming story to help raise autism awareness. Part of the proceeds will be donated to HollyRod4Kids Foundation (hollyrod.org) to help children with autism gain access to affordable treatments. Scholastic, \$17.



Find more autism resources and our interview with Holly at www.Scholastic.com/parents/healthqa.

normal when it comes to reaching developmental milestones, but if parents have a concern with their child's development—for example, the child isn't making eye contact; interacting with others; babbling, gesturing, or developing language at an appropriate rate—they should not hesitate to discuss it with their pediatrician. The American Academy of Pediatrics also recommends periodic developmental screening (which involves a series of questions about the child's skills and behavior) around 9, 18, and 24 to 36 months. If those screenings indicate a problem, ask your pediatrician for a referral to a developmental specialist and Early Intervention (through your state). The sooner a child is diagnosed and starts getting treatment, the better his chances for improvement. **P&C**

Rachel Rabkin Pechman is a health writer and editor who lives with her daughter and husband in Hoboken, NJ.

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