

The Cause of Autism

Overview and Common Myths

Understanding Which Factors Contribute to Autism (and Which Do Not)

Developing a deeper understanding regarding the cause of Autism is a goal held by parents and professionals alike. While the definitive cause of Autism is not fully understood in all cases, there are several factors that can be ruled out as causes by the ever-growing body of evidence and research.

In some cases, the myths on this page are perpetuated by those with malintent, while others are perpetuated by well-meaning individuals who are simply hoping to understand the reason for Autism. In either case it's important that these myths be debunked with information based on science, evidence, and peer-review.

Causes of Autism: Vaccines and Other Common Myths

Vaccines

MYTH: Autism is caused by childhood exposure to MMR (mumps, measles, and rubella) vaccines.

FACT: The initial research suggesting a link between Autism and vaccines has been repeatedly disproven, and its results never reproduced.

- ◆ There is plenty of evidence that autism existed long before the introduction of MMR vaccines.
- ◆ Children receive the vaccine around 12-18 months old, close to when the first signs of Autism begin to emerge. But correlation does not equal causation.
- ◆ The safety of vaccines has been repeatedly tested and confirmed across large groups of people.
- ◆ Removal of the ingredient in vaccines speculated to contribute to Autism (thimerosal) has had no impact on the prevalence of Autism.
- ◆ Numerous peer-reviewed articles have been published busting the myth, including the following:
 1. [Vaccines are not associated with autism: An evidence-based meta-analysis of case-control and cohort studies](#)
 2. [Autism Occurrence by MMR Vaccine Status Among US Children With Older Siblings With and Without Autism](#)
 3. [Measles, Mumps, Rubella Vaccination and Autism: A Nationwide Cohort Study](#)

Other Common Myths

MYTH: Autism is caused by emotionally-distant parenting.

FACT: How a parent interacts with their child has no impact on the child's diagnosis of Autism.

MYTH: Only males can be diagnosed with Autism.

FACT: While males are more commonly diagnosed, Autism occurs in individuals of all genders.

MYTH: The increasing rate of Autism over the past decades represents an Autism "epidemic".

FACT: The main causes for the observed increase are changes to the diagnostic criteria and an improvement in the ability to detect milder forms of Autism that previously would have gone undiagnosed.

The Latest Evidence Regarding Cause

The best evidence today suggests that Autism is associated with the interaction of over 800 separate genes. The complexity of how these genes interact helps to explain why not everyone who carries genes associated with Autism ultimately receives a diagnosis, as well as why Autism itself is so variable in the way it is expressed. Many psychologists believe the genes associated with Autism persist in the population at large because they contribute to advantageous traits like high intelligence and enhanced sensory perception.

Davidson M. (2017). Vaccination as a cause of autism-myths and controversies. *Dialogues in clinical neuroscience*, 19(4), 403–407. <https://doi.org/10.31887/DCNS.2017.19.4/mdavidson>
Gabis, L. V., Attia, O. L., Goldman, M., Barak, N., Tefera, P., Shefer, S., Shaham, M., & Lerman-Sagie, T. (2022). The myth of vaccination and autism spectrum. *European journal of paediatric neurology*, 36, 151–158. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpn.2021.12.011>
Lord, C., Elsabbagh, M., Baird, G., & Veenstra-Vanderweele, J. (2018). Autism spectrum disorder. *Lancet*, 392(10146), 508–520. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31129-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31129-2)

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