


# Autism rates: Why are they on the rise

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The North Portico of the White House is illuminated in blue for Autism Awareness Day, in Washington, U.S. April 2, 2020. REUTERS/Tom Brenner/File Photo [Purchase Licensing Rights](#)  , [opens new tab](#)

Jan 14 (Reuters) - Autism spectrum disorder is a neurological and developmental condition marked by disruptions in brain-signaling that cause people to behave, communicate, interact, and learn in atypical ways.

Autism diagnoses in the United States have increased significantly since 2000, intensifying public concern over what might contribute to its prevalence. Here is what you need to know.

## HOW IS AUTISM DIAGNOSED?

There are no objective tools for diagnosing autism such as blood tests or brain scans. Instead, diagnoses are made based on observations and interviews.

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The term spectrum reflects the wide range of possible manifestations. Some people with ASD may have good conversation skills while others may be nonverbal. Some may be acutely sensitive to sounds, touch, or other triggers. Some may have restricted or repetitive behaviors or interests. Some may need help with daily living, while others require little or no support.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends screening all children for autism at 18 and 24 months, when most children will begin to show symptoms. Yet the average age of diagnosis remains close to 4 years in the U.S. and 5 years globally.

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## HOW COMMON IS AUTISM?

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By 2020, the U.S. autism rate in 8-year-olds was 1 in 36, or 2.77%, up from 2.27% in 2018 and 0.66% in 2000, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A 2021 [study](#) , [opens new tab](#) from England put the rate in children there at 1.76%, up from 1.57% in 2009.

The World Health Organization estimates the worldwide prevalence in children at 1%, up from 0.62% in 2012, with the caveat that many countries lack the resources to identify cases and report them.

## WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

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The causes of autism are unclear. There is widespread speculation among scientists that its neurological characteristics may develop in utero, when the fetal brain is being wired. Studies have linked autism to maternal factors in pregnancy, and some research suggests a link to birth complications and timing.

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A growing area of research focuses on epigenetics - the interactions between genetic and environmental factors. One theory suggests that a woman's exposure to air pollution or harmful contaminants before or during pregnancy may trigger a genetic mutation leading to autism in her child.

Gene variations in some people with autism strengthen the evidence for a genetic component. Among the genetic disorders linked with higher risks for autism are Fragile X syndrome, tuberous sclerosis complex, Phelan-McDermid syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome.

Other potential risk factors may include a sibling with autism, the age of parents when conceiving children, very low birth weight, jaundice as a newborn, complications in utero or during birth, having an unhealthy assortment of organisms living in the intestines, and

immune system disorders.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., President-elect [Donald Trump's](#) nominee for U.S. health secretary, and other public figures have promoted a theory - contrary to scientific evidence - that childhood vaccines are a cause of autism. The idea stems from a since-debunked study from British researcher Andrew Wakefield in the late 1990s that connected a rise in autism diagnoses with widespread use of the measles vaccine.

No rigorous studies have found links between autism and vaccines or medications, or their components such as thimerosal or formaldehyde.

## WHY ARE AUTISM RATES RISING?

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Researchers attribute the rise in autism diagnoses to more widespread screening and the inclusion of a wider range of behaviors to describe the condition.

In 2013, mental health experts combined what had been three separate diagnoses - autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder and pervasive developmental disorder - under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorder.

An October 2024 [study](#) [opens new tab](#) of U.S. insurance claims data found the largest increases in diagnoses were in groups with low screening rates in the past, including young adults, females, and children from some racial or ethnic minority groups.

Researchers have also noted that certain risk factors have become more common, such as having been born prematurely or to older parents.

## ARE THERE TREATMENTS?

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There are no treatments or cures for autism, nor can it be reversed. However, experts agree that early diagnosis is crucial. Intervention with supportive measures – ideally before age three - is critical for improving cognitive, social and communication skills.

Such measures can include speech therapy, occupational therapy, social skills training, sensory integration therapy, visual aids, structured routines, individualized education plans, family therapy, and providing a calm and predictable environment.

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