

WHAT CAUSES AUTISM?

Although one specific cause of ASD is not known, current research links autism to biological or neurological differences in the brain. Autism is believed to have a genetic basis, although no single gene has been directly linked to the disorder. Researchers are using advanced brain-imaging technology to examine factors that may contribute to the development of autism. MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) and PET (Positron Emission Tomography) scans can show abnormalities in the structure of the brain, with significant cellular differences in the cerebellum.

Research also shows that certain environmental influences may further increase, or reduce, autism risk in people who are genetically predisposed to the disorder. Importantly, the increase or decrease in risk appears to be small for any one of these risk factors:

Increased risk:

- Advanced parent age (either parent)
- Pregnancy and birth complications (e.g. extreme prematurity [before 26 weeks], low birth weight, multiple pregnancies [twin, triplet, etc.]
- Pregnancies spaced less than one year apart

Decreased risk:

- Prenatal vitamins containing folic acid, before and at conception and through pregnancy

No effect on risk:

- Vaccines. Each family has a unique experience with an autism diagnosis, and for some it corresponds with the timing of their child's vaccinations. At the same time, scientists have conducted extensive research over the last two decades to determine whether there is any link between childhood vaccinations and autism. The results of this research is clear: Vaccines do not cause autism. The American Academy of Pediatrics has compiled a comprehensive list of this research.