

Children with autism experience interrelated health issues

19 September 2012, by Kate McIntyre

(Medical Xpress)—One in 88 children has been diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A new study by a University of Missouri researcher found that many children with ASD also experience anxiety, chronic gastrointestinal (GI) problems and atypical sensory responses, which are heightened reactions to light, sound or particular textures. These problems appear to be highly related and can have significant effects on children's daily lives, including their functioning at home and in school.

Micah Mazurek, an assistant professor of [health psychology](#) and a clinical child psychologist, found in her study of 2,973 children and adolescents with ASD that nearly one-fourth also had chronic GI problems, such as constipation, [abdominal pain](#), bloating, diarrhea or nausea. The results also showed that children with chronic GI problems were more likely to experience anxiety and sensory problems.

"These problems can have a very real impact on daily life. Children with anxiety may be distressed or reluctant to engage in new activities, and those with sensory problems may have trouble [paying attention](#) or participating in over-stimulating environments," Mazurek said. "These children may also suffer uncomfortable GI problems that they may not be able to communicate about to adults."

Clinicians should be aware that anxiety, GI problems and sensory sensitivity often co-occur in individuals with ASD. Effectively managing these concurrent issues may improve children's quality of life and their responses to treatment, Mazurek said.

"Parents need to be aware that these problems may underlie some of their children's difficulties, so if they notice any symptoms, they should talk to their doctors or therapists about treatment options," Mazurek said. "Practitioners who work

with children with ASD need to be mindful that there is a pretty high rate of these problems, so if children are treated for one issue, it may be helpful to screen for these additional symptoms."

This is the first study to examine the relationships among anxiety, GI problems and sensory over-responsivity in a large, nationally representative sample of children and adolescents with ASD. Participants in the study were enrolled in the Autism Treatment Network, a network of 17 autism centers throughout North America that are focused on best practices for medical treatment of children with [ASD](#).

The study, "Anxiety, Sensory Over-Responsivity, and Gastrointestinal Problems in Children with Autism Spectrum Disorders," was published in the *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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