



# WELLNESS

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## Wellness Monthly

Healthy matters to keep in mind.

April 2009

### This Month's Topics:

- **Alcohol Awareness**
- **Autism**

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## Alcohol Awareness

### Risk Factors for Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

In the U. S., 17.6 million people--about 1 in every 12 adults--abuse alcohol or are alcohol dependent. Anyone can misuse alcohol. The following factors put you at increased risk of developing alcoholism:

- A family member who suffers from alcoholism
- A history of substance abuse
- A history of depression
- Having a post-traumatic stress disorder
- Peer pressure
- Being under stress
- Easy availability of alcohol

People with family histories of alcoholism should be particularly alert for signs of problems. Children of alcoholics are about four times more likely than others to develop alcohol problems, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. The addiction may skip a generation, too. A child of an alcoholic may never drink, but still pass on a genetic vulnerability to their children and/or an unhealthy lifestyle that could lead to drinking.

### Other risk-related statistics:

- The risk for alcoholism is higher among people who begin to drink in their early teens, as opposed to after age 21.
- More men than women are alcohol dependent or experience alcohol-related problems.
- Rates of alcohol problems are highest among young adults ages 18 to 29 and lowest among adults 65 years and older.
- Rates of alcoholism and alcohol-related problems vary among major ethnic groups. Alcoholism is twice as high among Native Americans than other Americans. Hispanics have a higher rate of

alcoholism than African Americans or Caucasians. More than 100,000 Americans die of alcohol-related causes every year. Alcoholism and alcohol abuse can be factors in violent crimes, teen pregnancies and date rape. If you suspect that you or someone you know has a problem, seek help now.

## **Role of Heredity in Alcoholism**

Experts believe that alcoholism arises from a wide range of physiological, psychological, social and genetic factors. As with many other diseases, alcoholism is influenced by both hereditary and environmental factors. Researchers are looking for the genes that influence vulnerability to alcoholism.

### **Genes**

Alcoholism tends to run in families, and genes partly explain this pattern. Regardless of whether children of alcoholics are raised by alcoholics, they are at risk for alcoholism or alcoholism related problems. A child of an alcoholic is about four times more likely than someone from a family with no alcoholics to develop a drinking problem.

Maintaining moderate drinking habits may be harder for a child of an alcoholic than for someone without a family history of alcoholism. Genetic risk to alcoholism, however, is not destiny. More than one-half of all children of alcoholics do not become alcoholic. A child of an alcoholic parent will not automatically develop alcoholism, and a person with no family history of alcoholism can become alcohol dependent.

Many other factors affect your risk for alcoholism: your friends, the amount of stress in your life, and if alcohol is easily available.

## **Genetics and Environment**

Researchers are exploring the relationship between genetics and environment. Studies suggest that a person's risk increases if he or she is in a family in which:

- an alcoholic parent is depressed or has another psychological disorder
- both parents abuse alcohol or other drugs
- the parents' alcohol abuse is severe
- conflicts lead to aggression and violence

## **Other Behaviors in Children of Alcoholics**

According to the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI), children of alcoholics may exhibit these other characteristics, too:

- Higher risk for alcohol and other drug problems
- Pervasive tension and stress
- Higher levels of anxiety and depression
- Poor performance in school
- Problems with coping

It's important to recognize that children of alcoholics can learn to trust, handle their feelings in healthy ways and build positive, nurturing relationships - all of which help protect them from

alcohol problems. While you cannot change your genes, you can change your unhealthy living patterns and how you deal with outside pressures. Knowing you are at risk can motivate you to take steps to prevent alcoholism.

### Health Tip: Diabetics and Drinking

Ask your doctor if you should drink at all. If you have diabetes and get insulin shots or take other diabetes medication, you may end up with low blood sugar if you drink alcohol, the American Diabetes Association says. If your doctor says it's OK for you to have a drink now and then, the association offers these guidelines to help you use alcohol safely:

- Just as with non-diabetics, only moderate drinking -- one drink a day for women, two for men -- is recommended.
  - Since alcohol can contribute to low blood sugar, always drink with a meal or on a full stomach.
  - If you are watching your weight, know that alcohol is high in calories, and can quickly cause unwanted weight gain.
  - Look for drinks to mix with alcohol that are low in sugar or sugar-free, such as a diet soda, tonic, sparkling water or club soda.
  - Don't drink alcohol if you have nerve damage or high blood pressure.
1. **Symptoms are sometimes overlooked.** For those with a chronic condition, symptoms aren't always seen as depression. The patient or family members may assume that feeling depressed is expected for someone struggling with a serious illness.
  2. **Symptoms of depression are not identical for everyone.** We all cope differently. If you or your loved one has any signs of depression, contact your health care professional immediately.

While you may have to live with a chronic condition for the rest of your life, it doesn't have to rule your life. United Behavioral Health is here to help. Call or log on any time for help with any of life's challenges.

## Autism

### How Widespread Is Autism?

No one knows just how many people have autism. Estimates range from two to six out of every 1,000 people. This means as many as 1.5 million Americans have some form of autism. The U.S. Department of Education and other governmental agencies say autism is growing at a rate of 10 percent to 17 percent a year. The Autism Society of America estimates the number of people with autism could reach 4 million in the next decade.

Autism is a complex developmental disability appearing in the first three years of life and affects how the person interacts and communicates. The origin of the disorder is mysterious: Researchers aren't really sure why or how it happens, but they do think there are genetic factors.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says it is not sure what accounts for the increasing prevalence of autism: Is it actually more children that are being affected than ever before, or is it because of growing awareness about the disorder, better ability to diagnose and expanded definitions of autistic disorders?

The disorder affects boys more often than girls. About 80 percent are male. The CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM) reports that as of 2006, 1 in 150, 8-year-old children (6.6 per 1,000) in multiple areas of the United States had an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). ASD is classified as one of several conditions under the autism umbrella such as pervasive developmental disorders (PDD), Asperger's syndrome, Rett's syndrome and childhood disintegrative disorder. This number accounts for the lowest prevalence of ASD in Alabama (3.3 per 1,000 children) and the highest prevalence in New Jersey (10.6 per 1,000 children).

### **Vaccines at fault?**

The CDC says that the weight of evidence indicates that vaccines are not associated with autism. Due to ongoing concerns about this issue, the CDC will continue to study the potential role of vaccines as it strives to identify the biological and environmental causes of autism and other developmental disabilities.

### **Scans Show Sound-Processing Deficits in Autistic Kids**

Difficulty may underpin language, listening impairments found in disorder, study says.

Children with autism spectrum disorder process sounds a fraction of a second slower than other children, an abnormality that offers insight into listening and language issues linked to the condition, a new study says.

Researchers used magnetoencephalography (MEG), which records minute magnetic fields associated with electrical brain activity, to detect the slight delay in autistic children who were exposed to beeps, tones in pairs, vowels and sentences at different speeds, tones and frequencies.

The findings were expected to be presented Monday at the annual meeting of the Radiological Society of North America (RSNA), in Chicago.

"This delay in processing certain types and streams of sound may underpin the subsequent language processing and communication impairment seen in autistic children," researcher Timothy Roberts, vice chair of research in the department of radiology at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, said in a news release issued by the RSNA.

This signature of autism found in brain activity may eventually become a biomarker to improve classification of the disorder and aid in treatment and therapy planning, he added.

"We hope that in the future, these signatures will also be revealed in the infant brain to help diagnose autism and allow earlier intervention," he said. Autism inhibits the brain functions that govern the development of social and communication skills. About one in every 150 American children, mostly boys, is affected by the condition, according to the Autism Society of America.

**See signs and tips on the following page:**

## Health Tip: Signs That a Child May Be Autistic

### Symptoms may range from mild to disabling

Autism is a childhood developmental disorder that has no cure. Autistic children have problems with social interaction, communication, and may engage in repetitive behaviors. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke lists these common symptoms of autism:

- Seeming withdrawn, unresponsive or indifferent to others in social settings.
- Not responding when the person's name is called.
- Not making eye contact with other people.
- Difficulty communicating with others.
- Repetitive movements or behaviors, such as rocking, twirling or self-abuse.
- Disinterest in or aversion to physical affection.
- Delayed speech and verbal development.
- Not knowing how to play with other children.

Sources: HealthDay  
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## Resources

### Employee Assistance Program (EAP): United Behavioral Health (UBH)

**Toll-free number:** 1-866-248-4105 (7 days/24 hours)

**Access code:** 61570

[www.liveandworkwell.com](http://www.liveandworkwell.com)

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*Check your health plan regarding your coverage of services.*