



Diet, Exercise and Sleep Patterns in Autistic Adults



This article is a review of the following research: Weir, E., Allison, C., Ong, K. K., & Baron-Cohen, S. (2021). An investigation of the diet, exercise, sleep, BMI, and health outcomes of autistic adults. *Molecular Autism*, 12(1), 31.

It is well documented that children with autism are more likely to be selective eaters,¹ more likely to have poor sleep patterns,² and less likely to engage in regular physical activity.³ Thousands of scientific studies focus on the behaviors, patterns, and genetics of children with autism. However, as time moves forward, these children are becoming adults.

Adults with autism are significantly less studied than children with autism. Are the behaviors, patterns and habits the same for adults as they are for children? Do autistic adults have the same challenges with regard to eating, sleeping and exercise that children do? These are extremely important areas to investigate as previous research has shown that autistic adults have a higher risk of developing long-term health conditions, such as certain cancers, respiratory conditions, type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular conditions.⁴ Also, research studies have shown that those with autism are at a risk of premature mortality,⁵ and physical health conditions may contribute to this risk.

Researchers from the University of Cambridge, led by Dr. Elizabeth Weir, examined the habits of adults with autism.⁶ They sought to answer the following questions:

1. Are the sleep patterns, diet, and exercise habits of adults with autism similar to those of children with autism?
2. What long-term effects do these lifestyle factors have on an individual with autism?

Study

The study involved 1,183 adults with autism and 1,203 without autism. The 2,386 participants were between 16 and 90 years old. Each participant took an anonymous, online self-report survey about lifestyle choices, daily habits, medical history and family medical history.

Results

Based on statistical analysis, the study showed that:

- autistic adults were **more likely** to have **atypical eating patterns**
- autistic adults were **more likely** to have **sleep disturbances**
- autistic adults were **more likely** to be **underweight or obese**
- autistic adults were **less likely** to be engaged in **regular, physical activity**

Overall, autistic adults were less likely to meet minimal health recommendations for diet, exercise and sleep.

Lifestyle factors contributed more to the higher risk of cardiovascular conditions among those with autism than did family history.

Conclusions

This study suggests that some of the challenges facing children with autism, including sleep, eating and physical activity issues, continue into adulthood. While the study cannot conclusively determine that diet, exercise and sleep patterns are the cause of an increased risk of long-term health complications, it does point in this direction.

This research highlights the importance of seeking help with children's eating, sleeping and physical habits early in life so that healthy habits can be instilled and carried on into adulthood. It is worth noting that these challenges often have underlying causes, such as sensory sensitivities, compromised motor skills, and health issues. However, it is imperative that future research focus on understanding the reasons behind these specific challenges in order to provide more effective supports.

It is also vital that communities create support systems that recognize the challenges faced by adults on the spectrum. This would include improving health education, monitoring challenges, and developing strategies to provide support. With the rising number of autism cases each year, there is a growing population of autistic adults. Let's give our children the best chance of a long and healthy future by finding the supports they need in order to develop good eating habits, healthy sleep patterns, and a commitment to regular physical activity.

Written by Autism Advocate Parenting Magazine

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