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Study debunks birth season-autism risk link

Sat Jul 29, 2006 1:25 AM BST

By Anne Harding

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - One of the largest studies to date to look at the issue has found no relationship between the month a person was born and his or her risk of autism.

The risk of some psychiatric disorders, for example schizophrenia, has indeed been linked to season of birth, Dr. Abraham Reichenberg of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City and colleagues note. But studies of autism and birth month have had conflicting results.

It is not that just being born in a particular month that could influence risk, Reichenberg noted in an interview with Reuters Health. Instead, the season in which a person is born reflects their exposure to certain types of infectious agents in the womb. An example is whether their mother caught the flu during flu season. Nutrition could also vary throughout the year, he added.

Such exposures would not cause the disorder, he explained, but might be interacting with genes or nutrition to affect risk. "We don't really know how it works," he said.

Reichenberg and his team looked at Jewish men and women born in Israel during the early 1980s who were assessed by the Israeli Draft board at the age of 17. There was a total of 311,169 people, including 211 with autism or related disorders.

The researchers point out that a person with autism in the group they evaluated would be likely to truly meet diagnostic criteria for the condition, especially since the individuals in the study grew up in an era where the diagnosis of autism was much more rare than it is today.

The researchers found no link between the month a person was born and autism risk. "In light of the present and other recent findings, it would seem logical that future attempts to identify an association between birth months and risk for autistic spectrum disorders should be exercised with caution," they conclude.

SOURCE: American Journal of Psychiatry, July 2006.

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