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Autism link with birth problems

By Julie Robotham Medical Editor
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INFANTS who have seizures, trouble breathing or abnormal reflexes immediately after birth are six times more likely to be diagnosed with autism later in childhood, says Sydney research that may help to clarify the origins of the mysterious disorder.

Nadia Badawi, from the Children's Hospital at Westmead, analysed the medical records of all 276 children born at full term in Western Australia between 1993 and 1996 who were recorded as suffering newborn encephalopathy - seizures, or breathing, feeding or muscle tone problems that continued for longer than 24 hours after birth.

She matched them against state government records of children with autism, Asperger's syndrome and related conditions. She found that one in five of the children had one of the disorders - six times higher than the expected number.

Associate Professor Badawi, a neonatologist, said the study confirmed a link long suspected by doctors and would put pediatricians and parents on the alert for worrying signs in children who had been unwell after birth. But it did not inevitably mean birth trauma caused the disorder, said Professor Badawi, whose study was published this week in the journal *Developmental Medicine and Child Neurology*. Both problems might be manifestations of a more fundamental abnormality that developed earlier in pregnancy.

Alastair MacLennan, professor of obstetrics and gynaecology at Adelaide University, said the study was consistent with his own research that suggested cerebral palsy was linked to infections in the mother.

Bruce Tonge, an autism specialist and head of the Department of Psychological Medicine at Monash University, said the findings were in line with a broader theory of autism - that some children have an underlying genetic predisposition that might be triggered by another factor in their environment.

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