# Rising autism rates prompt new focus on diet and environment in prevention and intervention



A growing number of children in the UK and other countries are experiencing psychological, behavioural, and physiological challenges frequently diagnosed as autism, sparking attention from researchers and health advocates about the potential causes behind this marked rise. Recent reports highlight that autism rates have increased steeply over the past few decades, with new studies suggesting environmental factors, including diet and maternal nutrition, may play a significant role.

Official data from the UK estimates that around one in 62 children are classified as autistic, marking an eightfold increase over 20 years. Regional figures reveal even higher rates, with Scotland and Northern Ireland reporting diagnoses in approximately one in 20 children, affecting about one in 14 boys in Scotland. In the United States, autism prevalence has escalated dramatically over the past 50 years, climbing from 2 in 10,000 to roughly one in 36 children. These sharp rises extend beyond what genetics alone can explain. Since genetic change occurs gradually over generations, experts are turning their attention to environmental influences to account for the surge.

The US National Institutes of Health have recently launched a priority research programme to examine what is causing the increase in autism diagnoses. Similarly, in the UK, the independent mental health charity Food for the Brain convened a ‘Smart Kids’ conference on 24 April, gathering global experts to explore factors driving neurodivergence—including autism and ADHD—and to assess how diet, lifestyle, social media, and pre-conceptual nutrition may impact children and teenagers’ neurological development.

One notable contribution comes from Dr Chris D’Adamo, Assistant Professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine and Director of the Centre for Integrative Medicine. Publishing in the journal Personalized Medicine, Dr D’Adamo notes a 300 per cent rise in autism since 2000 and presents a case study where early intervention addressing modifiable lifestyle and environmental factors led to a reversal of autism symptoms in twin toddlers. The girls initially exhibited limited communication, repetitive behaviours, resistance to change, and severe gastrointestinal problems. After comprehensive tailored interventions focused on diet, environment, and lifestyle, both twins demonstrated significant improvements within a few months. Autism severity scores dropped markedly, with one twin’s score decreasing from 76 to 32 and the other's from 43 to 4.

UK-based functional nutritionist Dr Lorene Amet of The Lauriston Centre has applied similar integrative approaches with success in hundreds of families. Supporting this approach, a 2014 survey conducted by the charity Thinking Autism, later analysed by Queen Mary, University of London academics, involved 237 families using dietary interventions for their autistic children. The findings revealed that 170 families experienced “life-changing” or “significant” improvements, while only 12 children showed no noticeable benefit.

Despite accumulating evidence, the National Health Service (NHS) maintains that autism has no cure and currently advises against interventions such as vitamins, minerals, or dietary modifications as treatments. At present, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines do not include targeted nutritional strategies for managing autism, limiting parental options.

Beyond post-diagnosis intervention, research also explores autism risk reduction before birth. Associate Professor Michelle Murphy of Universitat Rovira I Virgili in Spain has identified a link between deficiencies of B vitamins—particularly folate and B12—early in pregnancy and increased risk of children displaying autism-related traits such as withdrawn behaviour, anxiety, depression, or aggression by age six. This aligns with longstanding knowledge about the importance of folic acid supplementation in preventing neural tube defects, which are statistically six times more frequent in children with autism.

Further work by Professor David Smith of Oxford University underpins these findings. His research demonstrated that B vitamins reduce homocysteine, a toxic amino acid associated with autism, depression, cognitive impairments in children, and neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer’s. Professor Murphy’s studies indicate that even mild elevations in homocysteine, linked to vitamin B12 and folate deficiencies before pregnancy, strongly predict neurodivergent outcomes in offspring, highlighting the need for nutritional screening before conception.

Recent research from the European Union reveals that nine in ten obese women fail to meet folic acid supplementation guidelines during early pregnancy and pre-conception, exacerbating the risk of neurodevelopmental issues. A study assessing 3,000 EU children found median blood levels of vitamin B12 below that considered optimal for brain development, with one-third of these children at dangerously low levels. Vegan children were reported to have a higher prevalence of B12 deficiency.

To assist families and advance research, Food for the Brain offers a free online assessment for parents to evaluate their child’s cognitive, emotional, and behavioural function and complete a diet and lifestyle questionnaire aimed at optimising brain health. The charity also provides home testing kits measuring homocysteine levels to identify potential nutritional deficits affecting brain function.

Dr Rona Tutt, OBE, trustee of Food for the Brain and former President of the National Association of Head Teachers, said: “People come in assorted shapes and sizes, with brains that are unique. A significant minority who are neurodivergent need to be recognised, valued, and supported to maximise their strengths and overcome their challenges. Understanding the factors driving the rise in neurodivergence is key to ensuring the best outcomes for future generations.”

The ‘Smart Kids’ conference hosted by Food for the Brain gathered leading authorities on autism and nutrition on 24 April to discuss prevention and mitigation through environmental and nutritional strategies. Further details about the conference and free assessments are available at foodforthebrain.org/smartkids.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

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