



FACT SHEET

MMWR – “Parental Report of Diagnosed Autism in Children Aged 4–17 Years, United States, 2003–2004”

May 4, 2006

Autism is a lifelong neuro-developmental disorder characterized by early onset of problems with social interaction and communication, and unusual, stereotyped behaviors.

Key Finding:

- Estimates of diagnosed autism were 5.7 per 1,000 school-aged children from the National Health Interview Survey and 5.5 per 1,000 school-aged children from the National Survey of Children’s Health.
- Together, these two national surveys of parents indicate that at least 300,000 children aged 4 to 17 years old had autism in 2003-04.
- These results are within the range reported from other studies using other methods.
- Both surveys indicated that boys were nearly four times more likely to have been diagnosed with autism than girls.
- Both surveys indicated that Hispanic children were less likely to have an autism diagnosis. (However, because the data are based on *parent report of a past diagnosis* we cannot exclude the possibility that the differences in rates by race/ethnicity reflect differences in symptom recognition, diagnosis, and access to services.)
- The surveys did not find any statistically significant differences by age.
- This study provides helpful information regarding the number of children who have been diagnosed with autism, and the impact of autism on families, but it doesn’t provide us any information into the causes of autism

Details on the Surveys:

- Both were conducted during the same time period (2003-2004).
- Both were based on a nationally representative sample of noninstitutionalized US children, ages 4-17.

- In both surveys, the parents or guardians of the sampled children were asked about a range of health issues.
- Autism prevalence was estimated by asking parents if they were “ever told by a doctor or other health care provider that their child had autism.”

Additional Information:

The consistency of the prevalence estimates across the two surveys supports high reliability (or reproducibility) of parental report of autism.

Also, there was a high level of consistency between parents reporting that their child had an autism diagnosis and parent reporting of expected social and behavioral concerns and special service needs.

- In the National Survey of Children’s Health, 94% of parents who reported their child had autism also reported that their child currently needs special services for a medical, behavioral, or other health condition.
- In the National Survey of Children’s Health, nearly all children 4 to 5 years of age with a diagnosis of autism were also assessed as having or being at high risk for developmental delay based on responses their parents gave to a series of questions on their child’s early development.
- In the National Health Interview Survey, 83% of parents who reported their child had autism also reported that their child difficulties with emotional symptoms, conduct, hyperactivity and/or peer relationships (compared with only 15% of children not reported to have autism).

This report provides helpful and reliable information about the number of children diagnosed with autism and shows some of the ways autism affects families.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES