

Rapid weight gain during infancy possible risk factor for later obesity in kids with autism

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Tanja Kral, PhD, Associate Professor of Nursing in the Department of Biobehavioral Health Sciences. Credit: Penn Nursing

Childhood obesity is a serious public health concern that can have a profound impact on children's health and well-being. Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) are more likely to have obesity compared to their peers with typical development, data show. Until recently, little has been known about why children with ASD are at increased risk for developing obesity.

A new study from the University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing (Penn Nursing), which examined early life risk factors for obesity among children with ASD, developmental delays or disorders, and children from the general population, is among the first to show that children with ASD had the highest frequency of rapid [weight gain](#) during the first six months of life, which may put them at increased risk for [childhood obesity](#). The study has been published online in the journal *Autism*.

"Healthy growth patterns during infancy, in

particular, may carry special importance for children at increased risk for an ASD diagnosis, including high-risk populations such as former premature infants, younger siblings of children with ASD, children with genetic disorders that predispose to ASD and others," said Tanja Kral, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Nursing in the Department of Biobehavioral Health Sciences and lead author of the study.

The study also showed that mothers across all groups with pre-pregnancy overweight or obesity were almost 2.5 times more likely to have a child with overweight or obesity at ages 2-5 than other mothers. The risk for childhood obesity across all groups was also 1.5 times greater for mothers who exceeded the recommendations for weight gain during pregnancy.

"Helping mothers achieve a healthy pre-pregnancy weight and adequate gestational [weight](#) gain and fostering healthy growth during infancy represent important targets for all children," explained Kral.

The findings of this research may shed light into possible mechanisms underlying the increased [obesity](#) risk in [children](#) with ASD and offer targets for early intervention.

More information: Tanja VE Kral et al. Early life influences on child weight outcomes in the Study to Explore Early Development, *Autism* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/1362361318791545](#)

Provided by University of Pennsylvania School of Nursing

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