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City researchers to take part in autism study

JHU, Kennedy Krieger experts to examine both genetic, environmental factors

By Kelly Brewington | kelly.brewington@baltsun.com
1:00 PM EDT, June 9, 2009

Researchers at [Johns Hopkins University](#) and [Kennedy Krieger Institute](#) will take part in what's being called one of the largest studies to examine the early causes of autism.

While other studies have asked if autism is caused solely by genetics or only by one's environment, this four-year study will examine both questions about the puzzling neurobiological disorder that affects 1 in 150 children nationwide.

Investigators here will be among researchers in three cities who will recruit 1,200 pregnant women who already have a child with autism and study them over the course of their pregnancy and their baby's first three years.

"This is a great opportunity to put gene and environmental hypotheses together," said Daniele Fallin, an epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and one of the study's principle investigators. "The great thing about this new study is we are able to do things in real time."

Medical experts don't know the specific causes of autism, but there

is mounting research that genetics likely plays a role, said Fallin. For instance, for couples with one autistic child, the risk of having a second child with the disorder is between 5 percent and 20 percent, said Fallin, much higher than the risk for the general population. Less is known about possible environmental factors, she said.

Fallin expects to recruit about 250 women from the Baltimore area, who will fill keep a diary of their eating habits and lifestyle, fill out questionnaires, participate in interviews and give blood and urine samples throughout their pregnancy. In addition, researchers will collect dust and other samples from their homes.

Once the babies are born, researchers will collect similar biological samples and investigators will closely follow the children for any early signs of autism.

Called the Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation, or EARLI, the study is spearheaded by the [National Institutes of Health](#) and includes experts from four research centers in California, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

For more information: <http://earlistudy.org>

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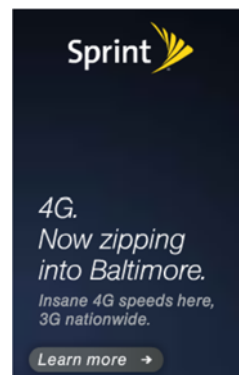
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