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News

Participants sought for autism study

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By DANIELLE LYNCH

A network of researchers is looking for Chester County families to participate in a new nationwide study that will focus on risk factors of autism spectrum disorders.

The network is known as the Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation. It will follow a cohort of up to 1,200 pregnant women who already have a child with autism.

Dr. Craig Newschaffer, department chairman at Drexel University School of Public Health and principal investigator, explained that the study "sets up a population where we can best address genes and environmental exposures."

"Siblings of a child with autism are at much higher risk of inheriting autism themselves," Newschaffer said on Tuesday.

The researchers will follow the participating mothers as soon as they become pregnant and document the development of the newborn for 36 months. The baby will have a number of developmental assessments, and the older sibling with autism may also have additional assessments to confirm his or her diagnosis, said study spokesman Richard Ochab.

Mothers will be asked to complete questionnaires, participate in phone interviews and provide biological samples. Bio-samples of the newborn babies will also be collected.

The project received initial funding of \$14 million from the Autism Centers of Excellence grant awarded by the National Institutes of Health, according Ochab. The study also received a \$2.5 million contribution from Autism Speaks earlier this year, he said.

Current research states that one in 150 people is diagnosed with autism. The cause of autism is unknown, and there is no cure.

The study began on Tuesday. Newschaffer said the network expects to enroll its first family by the end of the month.

Four network field sites have been set up in locations across the country including southeast Pennsylvania, northeast Maryland, and two places in northern California. The network expects to enroll about 70 mothers per year for four years at each of the field sites.

Local researchers participating in the study include Drexel University School of Public Health and John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

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Southeast Pennsylvania EARLI Outreach Coordinator Lauren Clay is available to answer questions about the study from Chester County families. She can be contacted by phone at 215-762-1806 or 877-821-0015. Her e-mail address is EARLI@drexel.edu.

To contact staff writer Danielle Lynch, send an e-mail to dlynch@dailylocal.com.

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