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UCD, Kaiser join study to seek causes of autism

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An ambitious hunt for clues to the causes of autism began on Tuesday, as a call went out for women willing to be monitored throughout new pregnancies and during their babies' early years.

Study organizers, including researchers at UC Davis and Kaiser Permanente, are looking for women who already have a child with an autism spectrum disorder and plan to expand their families.

Doctors hope that by keeping close track of new pregnancies, as well as the first three years of the babies' lives, they could learn whether anything from diet to home cleaning supplies might play a role in autism.

"That early time may be very, very critical to understanding autism risk factors," Craig Newschaffer, the lead researcher, said in a telephone news conference.

Newschaffer, an epidemiologist from the Drexel University School of Public Health in Philadelphia, is teaming up with the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Maryland, along with Kaiser and UC Davis, to recruit 1,200 women over the next four years.

They're looking for people willing to keep diaries during their pregnancies, and provide biological samples ranging from blood to hair to breast milk.

After the child is born, mothers will be asked to keep less extensive diaries, and researchers will visit their homes, taking dust samples and using questionnaires to monitor pesticides, flame retardants and other household chemicals the child might come in contact with. Childhood illnesses, medications, diet and other factors will also be tracked.

The children will be seen five times, starting at six months and continuing until they turn 3, by experts who will assess cognitive, language and social skills.

Researchers suspect a complex mix of genetics and environment may be behind the upsurge in autism spectrum disorders, which are now diagnosed in about one of every 150 children. The developmental disorder ranges from mild to severe, and affects children's ability to communicate and connect with others.

Although some genes seem connected to an increased autism risk, they are such common ones that it seems likely that "genes alone are not the full story," said Irva Hertz- Picciotto, a UC Davis Medical School professor involved in the Sacramento portion of the study.

Researchers hope the EARLI study, which stands for Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation,

might find correlations between certain environmental factors and autism. They will also be looking for biological markers, possibly some identifiable factor in blood or urine, that might indicate which infants go on to develop autism – potentially leading to earlier diagnoses.

The study focuses on women who already have given birth to one autistic child because they are likelier to have another.

The research is being funded by the National Institutes of Health, which is providing \$14 million, and by an advocacy group, Autism Speaks, which is kicking in \$2.5 million.

Comprehensive results won't be available for at least eight years, because the study will enroll a few hundred women annually for four years, and will track them and their children for nearly another four, from early pregnancy onward.

In Northern California, the EARLI study will be enrolling women who live within a two-hour drive of Sacramento or the Bay Area.

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