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Autism Study to Follow Pregnant Women

By JENNIFER CORBETT DOOREN

WASHINGTON -- Researchers are looking for 1,200 women who have a child with autism and who are pregnant with another child, as part of a large study of the disorder.

The study is primarily funded by the National Institutes of Health along with money from Autism Speaks, an advocacy group. The project, known as Early Autism Risk Longitudinal Investigation or EARLI study, will follow women from pregnancy, and then monitor the babies until they are three years old.

The study's goals are to identify early signs of autism and understand its possible causes. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in 150 U.S. children have an autism spectrum disorder, which includes autism, Asperger's syndrome and pervasive developmental disorders. There is no known cure for autism, which is characterized by impairments in social interaction and communication, and unusual behavior and interests, but therapy and medication can improve symptoms.

"By studying families who are already affected by autism, we feel we have the best chance at learning how genetics and environmental factors could work together to cause autism," said Craig Newschaffer, a department chair at the Drexel University School of Public Health in Philadelphia and the study's principal investigator.

Although the specific cause of autism remains unknown, people who already have a child with autism have a much higher risk of having another child with autism, or an autism spectrum disorder such as Asperger's syndrome. The study is open to pregnant women who have a child with a diagnosed autism spectrum disorder.

Dr. Newschaffer said blood and urine will be collected throughout the study so that DNA can be analyzed. When babies are born, researchers also will collect samples from the umbilical cord; the placenta, which supplies babies with nutrients and oxygen during pregnancy; and meconium, or baby's first stools.

Study participants must live near one of the four research centers in Philadelphia, Baltimore and Northern California.

Dr. Newschaffer said women who plan to become pregnant can contact a research center to pre-enroll. Women who are less than 20 weeks' pregnant are also eligible.

Babies born during the study period will receive a series of developmental assessments. Older siblings with autism may also receive assessments to confirm their diagnosis. More information can be found on the study Web site at <http://earlistudy.org>.

Write to Jennifer Corbett Dooren at jennifer.corbett-dooren@dowjones.com

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