

## ***Prevalence of Autism***

The November 13, 2015 data release from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) have many asking what is the prevalence of autism spectrum disorders (ASD)? Prevalence refers to the number of cases that are present in a particular population at a given time. The NCHS data show that the prevalence of ASD is 1 in 45 among children aged 3-17 years.

### *I thought that 1 in 68 children have ASD. Why are the numbers different?*

The estimates from the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network estimate that 1 in 68 children have ASD. ADDM data are based on data collected from health and special education records of children living in 11 communities across the United States during 2010. These 11 communities comprised over nine percent of the United States population of 8-year-olds in 2010. The focus is on children who are 8 years old because previous work has shown that, by this age, most children with ASD have been identified for services.

National Health Information Survey (NHIS) data for 2011–2014 were used for the NCHS analysis. NHIS is a nationally representative household survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Center for Health Statistics. This cross-sectional survey collects data continuously throughout the year. Interviews are conducted in person in respondents' homes, with telephone follow-up if needed. Prevalence estimates of ASD, ID, and other DD for children aged 3–17 years were calculated using data collected in 2011–2014. The prevalence of children with any of the three conditions (ID, ASD, or other DD) did not differ significantly.

### *Are there other data sets that examine the prevalence of autism?*

CDC has been tracking the prevalence of ASD for nearly 20 years. Besides NHIS, CDC has conducted National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH) and currently supports the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network. Table A in the current NHIS report (No. 87, November 13, 2015) <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nhsr/nhsr087.pdf> provides a summary of each system as well as the most recent prevalence estimate of children with ASD. It is important to note that the three systems use different sampling strategies, including different age groups, and they use different methods to estimate ASD prevalence. Therefore, these three systems are not directly comparable. Together the findings from NHIS, NSCH, and ADDM Network each contribute unique information to help form a comprehensive picture of ASD among children in the United States.

### *What can we do? What's next?*

We should use the existing ASD data we do have while constructively working with our federal partners toward improving the methods of collecting the data. We need to continue supporting tracking and monitoring efforts. Population surveys are not perfect. By continuing to work together with our federal partners, these surveys may be better in the future.

Overall, the findings from NHIS and ADDM show that ASD is increasing among children in the United States. These children need access to services. The next step is for the United States to address its

capacity crisis for providing high-quality early intervention and learning services. A [new commentary in \*Pediatrics\*](#) proposes that every state needs: 1) a family-friendly, screening and care coordination entity, 2) comprehensive, tiered, and equitable assessments for "at-risk" or referred children, 3) universal access to high-quality early learning or preschool programs, and 4) continuous accountability for the early detection process from birth to 5 years, and this includes an outcome-based metric for kindergarten readiness. We have an opportunity to collaborate with leaders in health, education, and social service sectors to boldly address our nation's capacity crisis in a system-wide manner so that children living with ASD are able to access the services that they need.

For more information:

[ADDM](#)

[NCHS](#)

NCBDDD Statement

Strategies for service: [Pediatrics commentary](#)

[Learn the Signs. Act Early.](#)