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EXCLUSIVE HEALTHCARE

RFK Jr., HHS to Link Autism to Tylenol Use in Pregnancy and Folate Deficiencies

Kennedy's autism report, touted by Trump, will suggest that using the pain reliever during pregnancy might be linked to the developmental disorder

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Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. testifying Thursday before a Senate committee. PHOTO: BILL CLARK/ZUMA PRESS

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. plans to announce that pregnant women's use of an over-the-counter pain medication is potentially linked to autism in a report that also will suggest a medicine derived from folate can be used to treat symptoms of the developmental disorder in some people, people familiar with the matter said.

The report, expected this month from the Department of Health and Human Services, is likely to suggest as among the potential causes of autism low levels of folate, an

important vitamin, and Tylenol taken during pregnancy, people familiar with the matter said.

The agency also plans to pinpoint a form of folate known as folinic acid, or leucovorin, the people said, as a way to decrease the symptoms of autism, which affected [roughly one in 31 eight-year-olds](#) in the U.S. in 2022.

Tylenol, whose active ingredient is acetaminophen, is a widely used pain reliever, including by pregnant women. Some previous studies have indicated risks to fetal development, but others have found no association. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists says it is safe to use in pregnancy, though it recommends pregnant women consult with their doctors before using it, as with all medicines.

Kennedy's report is expected to be a review of existing research, people familiar with the matter said. Scientists say conducting rigorous research on the causes of autism can take years. Decades of work looking for the roots of autism have found a variety of possible contributors, including genes.

Tylenol is made by McNeil Consumer Healthcare, a division of [Kenvue](#), and other companies make similar acetaminophen-based products.

Kenvue shares declined sharply after The Wall Street Journal's report. They were down about 10% Friday afternoon.

"Nothing is more important to us than the health and safety of the people who use our products," a Kenvue spokeswoman said. "We have continuously evaluated the science and continue to believe there is no causal link between acetaminophen use during pregnancy and autism."

The report is expected to suggest other potential causes of autism and suggest further study, people familiar with the matter said. It is unclear if the report will mention vaccines, which Kennedy for years has said might cause autism.

For months Kennedy has promised to reveal the cause of autism. "By September we will know what has caused the autism epidemic," he said in an April cabinet meeting with President Trump.

Critics panned the promise as an impossible timeline if the government were to conduct a valid scientific inquiry. Kennedy's advisers were more cautious, promising instead to launch a National Institutes of Health research effort by September.

The report being prepared by HHS staff takes a measured approach, people familiar with the matter said, listing possible causes for the disorder and discussing what is known and unknown. The NIH is taking the lead on drafting the report, which is set to be released later this month, the people said.

“We are using gold-standard science to get to the bottom of America’s unprecedented rise in autism rates. Until we release the final report, any claims about its contents are nothing more than speculation,” an HHS spokesman said.

Kennedy launched his career as an immunization skeptic in a 2005 Rolling Stone article, later retracted, in which he linked vaccines and autism.

“I think that he’s going to talk about vaccines as well,” said Kennedy ally Brian Hooker, chief scientific officer of Children’s Health Defense, the nonprofit that Kennedy previously led, in a recent video. “I do believe he will bring up the Tylenol connection, but I do also believe that he will look at vaccines and vaccine components.”

Large, reputable [studies](#) have found [no link between autism](#) and the measles vaccine, the vaccine preservative thimerosal, or simultaneous doses of vaccines.

Public health groups have criticized Kennedy’s comments on the disorder and have said the rise in autism largely traces to doctors getting better at diagnosing and reporting the condition, as well as expanding definitions of the condition.

Alongside the report, HHS is expected to announce large grant awards to academic researchers as part of the NIH’s autism data science initiative.

NIH director Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Dr. Marty Makary and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Director Dr. Mehmet Oz are helping shape the autism report, people familiar with the matter said.

The report hasn’t yet taken its final shape, the people said, and it isn’t clear if the White House will review it before publication.

[Hundreds of lawsuits](#) linking acetaminophen to autism or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder have been filed, though [a federal judge in 2023](#) ruled that the scientific evidence behind the claims was unreliable.

Allies of the Trump administration, including right-wing provocateur Laura Loomer and Children’s Health Defense, recently linked acetaminophen to autism in posts on X.

A few studies have suggested a link between Tylenol taken during pregnancy and autism. A group of 91 scientists in 2021 published a consensus statement saying acetaminophen was risky for fetal development.

But the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, a professional association for obstetricians, has said the consensus statement didn't have clear evidence.

"Failing to treat medical conditions that warrant the use of acetaminophen is, at present, understood to be far more dangerous than theoretical concerns based on inconclusive reviews of conflicting science," said Dr. Christopher Zahn, chief of clinical practice at the obstetricians association.

A 2024 [study](#) of more than 2.4 million children in Sweden didn't find an association between acetaminophen taken during pregnancy and risk of autism or ADHD.

Leucovorin, the treatment expected to be identified as promising in the health department's report, is chemically related to vitamin B9, or folate. It is prescribed to cancer patients going through chemotherapy.

It is well-established that vitamin B9 helps the brain and spinal cord develop in the early embryo. Pregnant women who take vitamin B9 supplements are less likely to have children with spinal-cord birth defects, or autism, studies have shown.

Small studies involving a few dozen children each have reported language or behavioral improvements in children with autism who take leucovorin.

Some children with autism have been found to have folate deficiencies, and leucovorin can help alleviate their symptoms, said Dr. Richard Frye, who has published studies related to folinic acid and autism, has written a book entitled "The Folate Fix" and is working with others to get a new version of leucovorin approved by the FDA. Frye submitted an application to the NIH for the autism-research initiative, but hasn't heard back, he said.

Other autism researchers offered tepid assessments of the evidence for leucovorin, saying it was worth studying but that the existing evidence had yet to persuade them that it helps symptoms in autistic people.

"It's not a crazy idea, there is some science behind it," said Lawrence Scahill, professor of pediatrics at Emory University School of Medicine. "There is currently no clear evidence that it is anything like a cure for autism."

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