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Pregnancy, antidepressants, and ADHD

DOI: 10.1038/MP.2014.90

A child’s risk of developing attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), but not autism spectrum disorder (ASD), may be altered in part by prenatal exposure to antidepressants, according to a study published in Molecular Psychiatry. The authors caution that any potential modest risk of antidepressants should be weighed against the possible consequences of untreated maternal depression or anxiety for each individual patient.

Roy Perlis and colleagues analysed associations between prenatal antidepressant exposures and ASD or ADHD risk in total of 1,377 children diagnosed with ASD, 2,243 with ADHD and a matched group of children without those disorders, drawn from the medical records of a large health system. The authors found that antidepressant exposure during pregnancy was associated with ASD risk; however, the severity of maternal mental illness also seems to affect this risk, and the association was no longer
significant when taking into account the mother’s history of major depression. Conversely, the rate of
ADHD was slightly increased in children exposed to antidepressants prenatally, even after adjusting for
the severity of maternal depression.

Overall, the results suggest that the risk of autism that has previously been observed with prenatal
antidepressant exposure may be better explained by risk associated with maternal illness; however, the
findings indicate that such exposure may be modestly associated with ADHD risk. Further studies will be
important to more precisely estimate the effects of antidepressants on ADHD risk, if any.

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