

In this article for The New York Times, journalists Emily Baumgaertner Nunn and Azeen Ghorayshi report on a recent federal report regarding potential causes of autism, a disorder whose incidence rates have grown exponentially across the United States. The report, signed by President Trump and Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr., pursues their long-asserted claims of an autism link to both vaccines and prenatal exposure to acetaminophen, commonly known as Tylenol. The article notes that numerous large-scale studies have already discredited any connection between vaccines and autism, while evidence surrounding acetaminophen remains inconclusive, at best. It includes a Harvard–Mount Sinai meta-analysis of 46 studies that found a connection between neurodevelopmental disorders and acetaminophen use during pregnancy, however, those researchers specifically warned not to equate correlation with causation. The journalists primarily keep the focus on science over politics, making it clear that decades of studies finding no clear causal links shouldn't be lost amidst public qualms about household medicines or vaccines.

Putting aside the controversy about environmental causes, the article provides background on the identification and diagnosis of autism. It explains that two main factors have contributed to an increase in diagnoses nationwide: changes to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) and growing social awareness. Broader diagnostic criteria and improved screening allow more individuals, even those with milder symptoms, to qualify as being on the autism spectrum. Experts, such as Dr. Helen Tager-Flusberg of Boston University, emphasize that autism results from complex interactions among hundreds of genes and environmental factors, rather than a single cause, like a drug or vaccine ingredient. The article demonstrates how science has advanced its understanding of autism, moving away from oversimplified, single-factor explanations and toward a multidisciplinary model based on both biology and environment.

The results of Antoniou et al.'s (2023) meta-analysis and systematic review of studies on the relationship between prenatal acetaminophen exposure and neurodevelopmental outcomes are consistent with the coverage in the New York Times. They discovered that, although there is some evidence linking the use of acetaminophen during pregnancy to an increased risk of autism or ADHD, the findings are conflicting and quite often influenced by recall bias, maternal illness, or genetics. Antoniou and associates urge more thorough longitudinal research and also warn that observational studies cannot establish causation. They conclude that acetaminophen should still be used cautiously under medical guidance, echoing the balanced perspective of the New York Times article. Both sources agree that autism is largely genetic, with the environment shaping—but not defining—individual risk. Together, they demonstrate how science and journalism can work in partnership to convey complex research accurately, acknowledging uncertainty while debunking misinformation. It's a reminder of how good reporting can make science clear without losing honesty or nuance.

References

Baumgaertner Nunn, E., & Ghorayshi, A. (2025, September 22). *What to know about painkillers, vaccines, genes and autism*. *The New York Times*.

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