*Journal of Advances in Medicine and Medical Research*

***29(11): 1-8, 2019; Article no.JAMMR.49419***
***ISSN: 2456-8899***
*(Past name: British Journal of Medicine and Medical Research, Past ISSN: 2231-0614, NLM ID: 101570965)*

# A Mini Review of Gastrointestinal Pathology and Nutrition in Autism Spectrum Disorder

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***Authors' contributions***

*This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. Author PVM designed the study, protocol and edited the manuscripts. Authors PSS, SM and SS managed literature searches, wrote the first draft of the manuscript and subsequent edits. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.*

***Article Information***

DOI: 10.9734/JAMMR/2019/v29i1130144
Editor(s):
(1) Chan-Min Liu, School of Life Science, Xuzhou Normal University, No.101,Shanghai Road, Tangshan New Area, Xuzhou City 221116, Xuzhou City, PR China.
Reviewers:
(1) Amalia Megremi, University of Aegean, Greece.
(2) Dr. Roosy Aulakh, Government Medical College & Hospital, India.
(3) Dario Siniscalco, University of Campania, Naples, Italy.
Complete Peer review History: http://www.sdiarticle3.com/review-history/49419

***Mini-review Article***

***Received 20 March 2019***
***Accepted 05 June 2019***
***Published 15 June 2019***

## ABSTRACT

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex, heterogenous group of neurodevelopmental disorders that result due to interaction of genes and environmental factors. ASD is associated with behavioural alterations and deficits in social communication. Current research on pathophysiology has proposed a link between severity of symptoms of ASD and gastrointestinal disturbances. Intestinal inflammation, dysregulation of gut microbiome may affect intestinal permeability, mucosal immune function and subsequently cause GI symptoms. Studies have also proposed the role of metabolic activity of the gut microbiome and dietary components (food allergens/toxins) to be associated with behavioral alterations in neurodevelopmental conditions including ASD. The present review aims to highlight the potential role of nutrients and dietary changes on gastrointestinal pathology and symptoms of ASD.

*Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder; gastrointestinal; diet; nutrients.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition presenting with restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, and activities, or persistent deficits in social communication and interaction. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), 2013 now classifies all individuals previously diagnosed with Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Autism Spectrum Disorder has strong genetic basis with several genes, Gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) a receptor, Beta 3 (GABRB3), Oxytocin receptor (OXTR), N-methyl-D-aspartate receptor (NMDA; GRIN2B) to name a few, being consistently implicated in pathogenesis of the condition. Recent studies, however, have described a number of environmental, non-genetic factors and associated disturbances in gastrointestinal and immune systems in the pathophysiology of ASD. These factors may have a direct link in the pathogenesis or may act as 'gene modifiers' thereby aggravating the primary causative mechanism [1]. Several research groups have studied the link between intestinal mucosal permeability, abnormal gut development, gastroesophageal reflux, and intestinal infections in ASD with inconclusive results regarding cause or effect relationship of the mentioned factors [2, 3, 4]. Research is also being conducted to analyze the role of diet and nutrition in ASD, with attention being focused on bioactive peptides, food allergens, toxicity, and sensitivity [5]. The present review aims to highlight the potential role of nutrients and dietary changes on gastrointestinal pathology and symptoms of ASD.

## 2. ROLE OF MATERNAL FACTORS AND BREASTFEEDING IN ASD

Prenatal maternal factors such as lifestyle, nutritional status especially during critical periods of fetal neurodevelopment have been shown to be associated with higher risk of ASD [6]. Maternal smoking and alcohol consumption have been shown to influence neurodevelopment by causing reduced blood flow, oxygen deprivation to the developing brain, placental insufficiency, hormonal dysregulations, changes in fetal gene expression etc. Alcohol is considered teratogenic and has been reported to cause structural brain anomalies in addition to social behavioral disturbances [6].

Several studies have described the role of maternal immune-mediated conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis and thyroid disease with increased risk of ASD. While the studies have not reported a definitive association, a significant inflammatory component in these conditions with other environmental factors modulating the autoimmune status, may lead to an increased risk of neurodevelopmental disturbances in the fetus [7,8,9]. Similarly, maternal diabetes and obesity is associated with increased oxidative stress and inflammatory milieu along with disrupted immune mechanisms, all of which could contribute to the pathogenesis of ASD in the developing child [10,11].

Post-natally, breastfeeding has been described as a chief environmental factor affecting the chance of occurrence of ASD [12]. Protective effects of breastfeeding on the developing GI tract have been described with, shorter duration of breastfeeding (less than 6 months) being associated with increased chance of infants developing ASD. Data from parent interview-based studies revealed early occurrence of GI symptoms (within 2-3 years of age) in children diagnosed with ASD, especially in those who were fed with infant formula and bovine milk [13,14,15].

Protein content of breast milk is low compared to bovine milk and infant formula products. Of the two protein components in milk-casein and whey, casein has a tendency to curdle thereby becoming more difficult to digest subsequently leading to GI symptoms in the infant such as constipation or diarrhea and abdominal pain. Breast milk is low in casein, which protects the infant from GI disturbances. Additionally, bioactive agents present in breast milk aid in development of the brain and immune system [16].

### 2.1 Dietary Considerations

Exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life will aid in optimal growth and development of the infant, while preventing occurrence of GI symptoms thereby reducing exacerbation of neurological symptoms of autism. The WHO recommends continuation of breastfeeding for up to 2 years of age along with introduction of solid food items. Substituting bovine milk with coconut

or soya milk may aid in reducing severity of symptoms in children with ASD.

## 3. GUT-BRAIN AXIS

Dysregulation in the gut microbiome and subsequent metabolic activity have been suspected to alter behavior and cognition in several neurodegenerative diseases, such as Alzheimer's disease, Parkinson's disease etc. Thus, it may be hypothesized that gastrointestinal factors may play a role in neuroinflammation and subsequent brain dysfunction in ASD [17]. There exists a bi-directional communication between the gut and the brain, which involves afferent and efferent pathways. The afferent pathway includes cytokines, intestinal hormones and microbiota while the efferent pathway includes neuro-endocrine and autonomic regulation [18]. The gut-brain axis plays a role in modulation of body metabolism through regulation of appetite and energy homeostasis as well as behavioral factors such as response to stress and pain, emotions and attitude.

The homology between the gut-blood barrier and blood-brain barrier has been suggested to play an important role in communication between the gut and brain [17]. Disruption of integrity of either barrier due to activity of inflammatory mediators may be associated with systemic dissemination of toxins. In context of ASD, neurotropic viruses or bacterial toxins from the intestine may reach the CNS through enteroendocrine cells or directly via vagus nerve, thereby causing aggravation of symptoms of the condition [19,20].

Diarrhea, constipation, abdominal pain, gaseousness are commonly reported gastrointestinal symptoms in patients with ASD. Presence of IgG-class antibodies directed against food antigens has been considered as indirect evidence of increased intestinal permeability. A study done by Lau et al. (2013) reported that children with autism have significantly higher levels of IgG antigliadin antibodies (but not IgA) compared with healthy controls, particularly those with gastrointestinal symptoms [21]. Recent studies confirmed these findings and also reported an increase in antibodies directed to several other food allergens, including casein and whole milk [22].

### 3.1 Role of Intestinal Microorganisms

The intestinal microbiota plays an important role in development of the immune system. Microbial colonization after birth influences the overall health status of the infant as well as neural development, through the above-mentioned mechanisms. This early colonization by beneficial bacteria is thought to be influenced by the mode of delivery. Infants born via caesarean section (C-section) have altered gut microflora compared to those delivered vaginally [23]. A study by Dominguez-Bello et al. reported that babies born by C-section harbored bacterial communities at different body sites (mouth, nasopharynx or meconium) similar to the mother's skin microbiota (Staphylococcus spp.), whereas the microbiota of infants delivered vaginally was closer to the mother's vaginal microbiota (*Lactobacillus*, *Prevotella*, or *Atopobium* spp.) [24]. This difference could be responsible for the occurrence of chronic, non-communicable diseases through the life of the individual.

Another aspect of gut colonization to be considered in infants is the use of antibiotics in the mother. Antibiotics prescribed for maternal infections or as intrapartum prophylaxis during C-section increases the risk of the drugs passing to the fetus/newborn through the placenta or breast milk. The implications of maternal antibiotics use could be inappropriate establishment of intestinal microflora, thereby causing immune and other systemic disturbances or may predispose the child to antibiotic resistance at an early age [25].

The concept of microbiota and gut-brain axis is gaining attention in the pathogenesis of neuro-developmental and neuropsychiatric disorders. Microbial colonization in infants has been proposed to coincide with neurodevelopment periods. Thus, disruptions in early gut colonization may be linked to dysfunction of the nervous system [26].

In context of ASD, apart from presence of lower levels of beneficial species, studies have reported overgrowth of obligate anaerobic organisms such as *Clostridium* spp. as well as *Vibrio* spp. [20,27]. These organisms do not breakdown fermentation end products such as short chain fatty acids-propionate, butyrate and acetate. Propionic acid especially has been detected in high levels in stool and urine samples of patients with ASD. Short chain fatty acids are capable of crossing the gut-blood and blood-brain barriers, thereby may be associated with symptoms of developmental delay, seizures along with GI manifestations in ASD [28].

## 3.2 Dietary Considerations

Dietary modifications based on identification of GI factors/symptoms, may aid treatment planning and in alleviating pain, constipation/diarrhea and other symptoms as well as improve non-verbal behaviors (agitation, anxiety, aggression, self-injury, sleep deprivation) as seen in ASD. In addition, a low carbohydrate diet that would reduce the production of short chain fatty acids may be advised in ASD. Studies have suggested a link between intestinal microbiota and metabolism in children with ASD and hyperoxalemia/hyperoxaluria [29]. Impaired oxalate metabolism may be associated with increased GI permeability and decreased intestinal microflora, which as described earlier may result in aggravation of neurological symptoms of ASD. It would therefore be advisable to avoid foods high in oxalates such as berries, grapes, apples; millets, oats; and nuts.

## 3.3 Probiotics and Prebiotics

Probiotics are live microorganisms (bacteria and yeast) that provide health benefits by restoring or improving normal gut microbiota. On the other hand, prebiotics are food components/ compounds that are selectively metabolized by indigenous bacteria and further promote the growth and activity of beneficial bacteria in the gut [30]. Prebotics are non-digestible food components that are fermented in the large intestine, and are then utilized by the existing gut microflora.

Probiotic therapy has been proposed as a relatively risk-free, adjuvant modality to ameliorate gastrointestinal symptoms in patients with ASD [31]. Supplementation has been demonstrated to increase counts of Lactobacilli and Bifidobacterium *spp.*, which improve both GI and core behavioral symptoms of ASD [32]. However, most studies are associated with the limitation of small sample size; therefore, future research should be conducted on a larger scale in order to accurately elucidate the effect of probiotics in patients with ASD.

An alternative approach to enhance gut microflora would be the use of prebiotics. As these compounds are unaffected by factors such as heat, stomach acid, duration etc. within the human body and environment (unlike probiotics, which may lose potency), increasing dietary intake of prebiotic fibers may be a more effective approach in improving gut health [30]. Prebiotics-rich foods include onions, garlic, oatmeal, wheat bran, asparagus, artichoke, apples with skin etc.

## 3.4 Gluten Sensitivity in ASD

In order to prevent/ameliorate GI and neurological manifestations, it is imperative to identify trigger food items and follow a restriction/elimination diet. Gluten, a protein complex, found in cereals such as wheat, barley, rye etc. has been implicated in the pathogenesis of several intestinal disorders [33]. Several research groups have studied the effect of gluten in ASD with conflicting results [34,35,36]. One aspect to be considered in the pathogenesis of ASD is the opioid phenotype of autism that is linked to 'exorphins'- food related oligopeptides [37]. Exorphins are derived from incompletely digested gluten and/or casein due to reduced activity of dipeptidyl peptidase-4 (DPP-4) enzyme [38]. These exogenous opioid peptides may influence GI functions and may also elicit behavioral changes through their effects on dopaminergic, serotoninergic and GABAergic systems in the brain. It may thus be hypothesized that a gluten-free, casein-free (GFCF) diet may reduce production of exorphins and prevent development or worsening of symptoms of ASD [37].

De Magistris et al. (2010) reported a high percentage of abnormal intestinal permeability test values [as established by the lactulose/mannitol (L/M) ratio] among patients with autism [39]. The study observed that patients with autism on a reported GFCF diet had significantly lower intestinal permeability test values compared with those who were on an unrestricted diet and controls. However, despite the increasing popularity, efficacy of the GFCF diet in improving autistic behavior remains to be proven. A Cochrane review (2008) reported that only two small randomized controlled trials investigated the effect of the GFCF diet in children with ASD (n = 35) [40]. The review concluded, based on the outcomes evaluated (overall autistic traits, social isolation, and overall ability to communicate and interact), that the evidence for efficacy of such an exclusion diet is poor, and large-scale good-quality randomized controlled trials are needed to validate the results [40]. Similar conclusions were reported by a recently published systematic review on treatment of autistic children with the GFCF diet [35]. However, in a two-stage randomized controlled study of the GFCF diet in children with ASD, Whiteley et al. (2010) reported significant

group improvements in core autistic and related behaviors after 8 and 12 months [41].

Several potential factors appear to influence response to dietary intervention in terms of symptom presentation. Age was found to be the strongest predictor of response, and participants between 7 and 9 years of age seemed to derive most benefit from the GFCF dietary intervention [42]. The above data suggest that removing gluten from the diet may positively affect the clinical outcome in some children diagnosed with ASD. Based on the findings, it may also be suggested that autism may be part of the non-celiac gluten sensitivity spectrum, at least in some cases.

## 3.5 Nutritional Deficiencies in ASD

Pathogenesis of ASD may begin during fetal developmental stages. As previously explained, maternal nutrition plays an important role in brain development and deficiencies have been reported to be associated with adverse neuro-developmental outcomes [43]. Nutritional deficiencies may be caused due to increased fetal metabolic demands or pre-existing maternal health conditions, which directly influence structural and functional brain development, thus increasing the risk of ASD [44]. Maternal vitamin A, D, folate, Vitamin B12, magnesium, omega-3 fatty acid and iron supplementation has been shown to protect the developing brain from inflammatory changes, neurotoxins and enhance neuronal development [6].

Studies have reported feeding problems, food selectivity, unusual eating patterns in patients with ASD [45]. Additionally, significant associations have been found between oral-motor, gastrointestinal and sensory problems in children with ASD. Dietary supplementation of essential nutrients is therefore widely employed in children with ASD to aid in growth and development, as well as prevent worsening of ASD status.

### 3.5.1 Dietary considerations

#### Vitamin B12 and Folinic acid

Studies have reported low methionine, homocysteine, cysteine in children with ASD. Additionally, reduced antioxidant capacity and abnormal trans-sulfuration metabolism have also been reported. Supplementation of vitamin B12 was found to elevate methylation capacity and improve 'redox status', thus improving clinical behavioral outcomes in children with ASD [46]. Vitamin B12 is naturally found in animal products such as, fish, meat, poultry, milk and milk products but generally absent in plant foods. Moreover, an inherent drawback of dietary vitamin B12 supplementation is that, oral absorption is less effective and does not guarantee adequate concentrations. Therefore, further studies are required to identify the most appropriate route of supplementation of vitamin B12 in patients with ASD.

Similarly, folinic acid, which is a reduced form of folate, plays a role in the metabolism of homocysteine and glutathione, similar to Vitamin B12. Folinic acid is naturally found in foods such as, chickpeas, beef liver, asparagus etc. A recent randomized clinical trial reported improvement in verbal communication after supplementation of folinic acid in patients with ASD [47].

#### Vitamin D

Vitamin D is a fat-soluble agent that plays the role of a 'neuroactive steroid' during brain development. The vitamin aids in cell proliferation and differentiation, calcium signaling and exerts neurotrophic and neuroprotective effects. Vitamin D also plays an essential role in myelination, thus may have effects on synaptic plasticity and neurotransmission [48]. In context of ASD, the plausible mechanisms of action of vitamin D are anti-inflammatory effects on the brain and regulation of serotonin. In a randomized clinical trial done by Saad et al. (2018), improvement in behavioral measures (Autism Evaluation Checklist, CARS, SRS) was observed 4 months after supplementation of vitamin D in children with ASD [49]. Sunlight is the best source of vitamin D, however, cheese, egg yolk; fatty fish such as tuna, salmon also provide the vitamin. Studies have reported improvement in core symptoms of autism, thus dietary supplementation must be considered, especially in autistic children with deficiency of vitamin D.

#### Omega-3 fatty acids

The two omega-3 fatty acids: Eicosapentanoic acid (EPA) and Docosahexanoic acid (DHA), play an important role in normal growth and development of the body, including neurodevelopment. Low concentrations of EPA and DHA have been observed in patients with ASD as well as other neurodevelopmental

anomalies, considering that these ortho-molecules (naturally occurring nutrients administered in optimal amounts for highest efficacy) have functional sites exclusively on cell membranes, including nerve cells [50]. Although, data from clinical trials have not directly reported benefits of omega-3 fatty acids in core symptoms of ASD, supplementation was safe and well tolerated and was found to benefit general neurodevelopment in children [51,52].

## 4. CONCLUSION

Identification of trigger foods and dietary modification in ASD is a gradual process and may differ between affected individuals. The present review highlights some of the common food allergens and nutrients/nutritional deficiencies responsible for exacerbation of symptoms of ASD. Further research is required to establish the effects of these agents as well as identify other probable food toxins and allergens affecting the pathology of autism spectrum disorder.

## CONSENT

It is not applicable

## ETHICAL APPROVAL

It is not applicable

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No financial assistance was obtained from any funding agency/sponsor for this study.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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*The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:*
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