

CDC data shows increase in autism

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently released data from its 2008 Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring network showing a 23 percent increase of autism spectrum disorders from 2006-2008.

The data are based on information collected from 14 sites in the nation. Colorado is among those sites. In Colorado, data are provided to the monitoring network from two regions—Arapahoe County and the remainder of the seven-county Denver metropolitan area (Adams, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson counties).

Autism spectrum disorders are a group of developmental disabilities often diagnosed during early childhood that can cause significant social, communication and behavioral challenges over a lifetime. They are “spectrum disorders,” meaning they affect each person in different ways and can range from very mild to severe.

The national data show one out of 88 children (11.3 per 1,000) in the monitoring areas identified as having an autism spectrum disorder, although prevalence estimates varied widely across the 14 sites. The new estimate reflects a 23 percent increase in two years and a 78 percent increase over six years.

The Colorado monitoring project found that in 2008 one in 85 children aged 8 years in Arapahoe County (11.8 per 1,000) had an autism spectrum disorder. This is a 60 percent increase from 2006, when one in 135 children age 8 (7.4 per 1,000) had an autism spectrum disorder.

In the remainder of the Denver metropolitan area, the monitoring network found one out of 156 children aged 8 in 2008 (6.4 per 1,000) had an autism spectrum disorder. This is the first year data have been published for the greater Denver metropolitan area, so a percent change cannot be calculated. Data were collected differently in the two study areas, so their numbers should not be compared.

The Arapahoe County data included information gained by the Colorado Department of Education working closely with school districts, which led to identification of additional children who met the surveillance criteria for having an autism spectrum disorder. The remaining

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seven-county region included only health data and not information provided by schools.

Dr. Lisa Miller, director of the Disease Control and Environmental Epidemiology at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment and principal investigator of the Colorado Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring network, said, “We don’t know the extent to which the data reflect better autism identification and reporting or a true increase in case numbers, but these data do show autism spectrum disorders continue to be a tremendous public health concern.”

Autism spectrum disorders affect boys disproportionately to girls. In Arapahoe County, one out of every 50 boys aged 8 years meets the surveillance definition for having an autism spectrum disorder, while one out every 345 girls aged 8 years meets the definition in 2008.

The causes of autism are not well understood. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is a partner with JFK Partners at the University of Colorado School of Medicine in the Study to Explore Early Development (SEED) as one of six Centers for Autism and Development Disabilities Research Excellence funded by the CDC.

“The purpose of the SEED study is to identify those risk factors associated with autism to begin to improve treatment and intervention and possibly prevention of autism,” said Cordelia Robinson, the director of JFK Partners, principal investigator of the SEED study and co-principal investigator of the Colorado Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring network.

Research shows that early intervention treatment services can greatly improve a child’s development, helping children from birth to 3 years old learn important skills.

In Arapahoe County, as in most of the monitoring network sites, most children are not diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder until after they are 4 years old

The Assuring Better Child Health and Development (ABCD) program is a statewide effort to ensure that developmental screening occurs with routine well child visits. Heather Dubiel, manager of the Early Childhood Unit at the Colorado Department of Public Health and

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Environment, is working closely with the statewide ABCD program to improve early identification of autism spectrum disorders and other developmental delays and disabilities in Colorado.

“While all children develop at their own pace, it is important that primary health care providers check in with parents on their child’s development at every well child visit, and many do this,” said Dubiel. “We also know that providers who use a standardized developmental screening tool are more likely to correctly identify a child with a developmental delay and get the family the support it needs to support the child’s development. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends three screens before the age of 3 to identify concerns early and ensure children and their families receive support as soon as possible.”

The full Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring network report can be viewed at the CDPHE website, www.cdphe.state.co.us/dc/crcsn/addm.html. Information about the ABCD program can be viewed at www.coloradoabcd.org.

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