

Calif. Study Finds Autism Not Caused By Vaccine

California researchers say that, based on a new analysis of medical records, they believe it is "virtually mathematically impossible" that immunization with the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine could cause autism.

The report, in today's *Journal of the American Medical Association*, is the second study in as many months to draw the same conclusion.

Medical epidemiologist Loring Dales and colleagues in the immunization branch of California's Department of Health Services looked at vaccination records of children born between 1980 and 1994 enrolled in California kindergartens, using samples of 600 to 1,900 children each year. They found that by age 2, about 73% of children born between 1980 and 1986 got the triple vaccine, called the MMR vaccine. That jumped to about 81% for children born between 1988 and 1994.

During the same period, Dales says, the incidence of autism "shows dramatic increase, from about 200 cases a year in the early 1980s to 1,200 a year in the 1990s."

The autism rates increased far more dramatically than the use of the vaccine, suggesting there is no link, researchers say. The findings are "incompatible with the idea that the vaccine could be a major cause or contributor to the increase in autism," Dales says.

A report last month in the *British Medical Journal*, based on a similar analysis in the United Kingdom, also found no correlation between the vaccine and autism.

Dales says the study was undertaken in response to concerns raised by research published in a British journal in 1998 that suggested widespread use of MMR vaccine coincided with and may be related to an increase in autism, a developmental disorder that strikes young children, causing social detachment and communication problems.

Further research suggested that the measles component of the vaccine could trigger autism in some susceptible children when given in combination with other vaccines.

Bernard Rimland of the Autism Research Institute in San Diego hasn't seen the California study but says the vaccine cannot be dismissed as a possible link to autism.

During the study period, "there was a distinct rise in the rate of autism, so something is causing that increase," he says. "It may be the number of vaccines children get at once, rather than simply the MMR by itself."

Or, he says, trace amounts of mercury found in a preservative in some vaccines could "disable the immune system, so the kids' ability to handle the measles virus is greatly reduced."

No mercury is used in MMR, he notes, and it is being phased out of other vaccines.

Despite studies finding no connection between autism and vaccines, Rimland says, questions remain.

Researchers are "in a big rush to dismiss the question," he says. "They want to exonerate the MMR, and it's too soon to exonerate it."