Biological marker for autism in babies could lead to earlier therapy and better development

A small study by researchers at Stanford University School of Medicine has identified a biological marker in the cerebrospinal fluid (CSF) of human infants that may predict the future development of autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The study, which exploited a “one-of-a-kind” archive of biomaterials, showed that the hormone vasopressin was present at much lower levels in the CSF of 0–3-month-old babies who were later diagnosed with ASD than it was in CSF samples from infants who weren’t subsequently diagnosed with ASD.

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Even without effective medications, early ASD diagnosis provides the opportunity for intensive behavioral therapy, which leads to better developmental outcomes. “When young children aren’t appropriately processing basic social stimuli early in life, it puts their brains on a different developmental trajectory,” said [researcher Karen] Parker. And while autism can be diagnosed from behavioral symptoms at around two years of age, long appointment wait times and shortages of autism specialists often delay diagnosis until four years of age—which is the typical age for diagnosis in the United States—or even later, causing children to miss the benefits of early treatment. If we could identify these children earlier, we could intervene earlier, Parker added.

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