

Early test for autism could be possible by measuring levels of the hormone vasopressin

Low levels of the hormone vasopressin in early infancy may presage an autism diagnosis in childhood, according to a new [study](#). Although preliminary, the results suggest that testing vasopressin levels — particularly in infants with high odds of having autism — could flag the condition in the first few months of life.

Early identification would allow autistic children to start therapies far sooner than is currently possible, says co-lead investigator [Karen Parker](#), associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Stanford University in California.

“By the time a child receives an autism diagnosis, they’re pretty far along the path of having these robust social impairments,” Parker says.

Previous work has shown that autistic children have, on average, [66 percent less vasopressin](#) in their cerebrospinal fluid than their neurotypical peers, and that [low levels of vasopressin](#) track with poor social skills.

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Given the small number of samples, the work does not suggest that doctors should collect cerebrospinal fluid from infants and test for vasopressin, [researcher John] Constantino says. But if the hormone is confirmed in larger trials to be a [biomarker](#) of autism, the strategy may be warranted for infants who have an older sibling or parent with autism and so [have high odds](#) of having the condition, he says.

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