Children's Restorative Medicine | Lyme Disease and Co-Infections

Can Lyme Disease Mimic Autism?

By Dr. Meghan Haggarty | April 17, 2017

April is National Autism Awareness Month. Even though Autism now affects 1 in 68 children, there is still no known cause of the disorder. Autism is also called Autism Spectrum Disorder, as although there are common traits every case of Autism presents differently. There is a saying “if you know one person with Autism, you know one person with Autism.” Autism Spectrum Disorder is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors that account for the variety of traits in each person on the spectrum. When diagnosing a child with Autism it is important to rule out other causes including hypothyroidism, toxin or metal poisoning and genetic disorders such as fragile X syndrome. An additional disease that can mimic the symptoms of Autism Spectrum Disorder in children is Lyme disease.

It is estimated that 20-30% of children on the Autism Spectrum test positive for Lyme disease. Lyme Disease is caused by the bacteria Borellia burgdorferi and can be

transmitted from a tick bite or from mother to fetus in utero. Lyme Disease is the fastest growing vector borne disease in North America. Mothers who have active symptoms of Lyme disease during pregnancy have a 50% chance of passing the infection to the fetus if untreated. Since Lyme disease is challenging to diagnose even in adults, many cases go undiagnosed in woman of childbearing age.

Lyme disease in children can affect cognition and cause speech delay, gross and fine motor delays, and learning delays through its ability to affect the neurological system. Lyme disease can be especially detrimental to a child's nervous system as during these formative years the brain does the most growing and developing during our lifetime. Small studies and anecdotal data show a decrease in Autistic symptoms in children with ASD that are treated for Lyme disease.

A 2012 article published in Medical Hypotheses (Kuhn et al) assessed 5 children who were positive for Lyme disease and had symptoms of ASD using the SCERTS criteria. The children were treated for 6 months using antibiotic therapy. Each of the 5 children's assessment scores improved in addition to improved speech and eye contact, and decreased repetitive behaviors.

Naturopathic Doctor Meghan Haggarty is a fellow of the Medical Academy of Children's Special Needs, as well as being a member of the International Lyme and Associated Disease Society. Her experience in both Autism and Lyme disease provides a unique expertise into the co-management of these conditions in the pediatric population. Naturopathic medicine can help by addressing the underlying infection, but also regulating the immune system and repairing neurological damage and inflammation caused from the original infection.

May is Lyme Disease Awareness Month. Stay tuned for more informative articles from our Naturopathic Doctors about Lyme disease and associated co-infections next month.

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