

LOCAL

CDC: Autism in children levels after years of rising

Rate of those diagnosed on disorder's spectrum in 2012 is same as in 2010.

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For the first time in more than a decade, the prevalence of autism and related disorders among children in the U.S. has stopped climbing.

According to a new study by the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, one child in 68, or 1.5 percent, is diagnosed with autism, Asperger's syndrome or a related disorder by age 8 - a rate unchanged from the previous survey, two years prior.

"It's a good sign," said Anna Laakman, director of education and training at The Center for Autism & Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Santa Ana.

But she and other officials cautioned that it's too soon to tell if the prevalence

SEE AUTISM • PAGE 7

AUTISM

FROM PAGE 1

of children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder has stabilized.

"What we know for sure is that there are many children living with autism who need services and support, now and as they grow into adolescence and adulthood," said Dr. Stuart Shapira, chief medical officer for the agency's National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities.

The report draws on 2012 data from communities in 11 states, not including California. While the average stayed the same, the percentage of children identified with autism ranged widely by community - 1.2 percent in parts of South Carolina compared with 2.4 percent in areas of New Jersey.

This is the sixth such study by the CDC. Over the years, the tracking system has shown the frequency of autism nearly doubling from one in 150 in 2002 to

one in 88 in 2008.

While it's clear that more children than ever are being diagnosed, questions remain about what has fueled the rise. The uncertainty is especially acute because while researchers have pinpointed certain risk factors, including genes and the environment, they still don't know all of the causes.

CDC Director Thomas Frieden has said the jump could be attributed to better detection.

Still, this year's report also says many children may not be getting identified as early as they could be.

In Orange County, Laakman said, it's her job to make sure that enough educators and health care providers are trained to treat and work specially with ASD children, and that they know the early signs.

"We're seeing quite a bit of autism," she said. "Our goal is to train as many people as we can. We know there's a huge need."

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