

Main Injuries Related to Food Selectivity in Autistics

Principais Agravos Relacionados à Seletividade Alimentar em Autistas

Principales Problemas Relacionados con la Alimentación Selectiva en Individuos Autistas

RESUMO

Introdução: O transtorno do espectro autista (TEA), é um transtorno de desenvolvimento que é descrito por condições neurológicas atípicas que podem afetar a comunicação do indivíduo, convívio com outras pessoas, e também causar padrões que sejam repetitivos, além de afetar a alimentação de grande parte dos portadores por meio da seletividade alimentar que é um agravamento que afeta diretamente a saúde do indivíduo, causando diversas doenças como deficiências nutricionais e doenças do trato gastrointestinal. **Metodologia:** Foi realizada uma revisão integrativa partir de conteúdos de artigos científicos selecionados através de plataformas de pesquisa, como: SciELO, periódicos CAPES, PubMed e BVS que abordaram o tema e acrescentaram informações importantes. **Resultados e Discussão:** A análise dos dados obtidos mostra que há presença de distúrbios provenientes da seletividade alimentar no autista, os artigos revelam que entre as doenças há maior prevalência de distúrbios gastrointestinais (88,9%), seguida de sobrepeso e obesidade (33,3%), menores prejuízos foram encontrados em distúrbios metabólicos (22,2%) e distúrbios de sono (11,1%). Com base nos estudos, se nota que a seletividade alimentar pode ser correlacionada com condições diversas. Tais comorbidades podem afetar de forma direta a vida e saúde do indivíduo, pois modifica o cotidiano do mesmo. **Considerações finais:** Observa-se, a partir dos achados que é de suma importância que seja prestado o cuidado em conjunto com uma equipe interdisciplinar para que sejam traçados meios para melhorar a alimentação de pessoas autistas e assim, sucessivamente, reduzir danos futuros.

DESCRIPTORES: Transtorno do Espectro Autista; Seletividade Alimentar; Risco à Saúde Humana.

ABSTRACT-

Introduction: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is described by atypical neurological conditions that can affect the individual's communication, coexistence with other people, and also cause patterns that are repetitive, in addition to affecting food intake. Most carriers suffer from food selectivity, which is a problem that directly affects the individual's health, causing various diseases such as nutritional deficiencies and diseases of the gastrointestinal tract. **Methodology:** An integrative review was carried out based on the contents of scientific articles selected through research platforms, such as: SciELO, CAPES journals, PubMed and VHL that addressed the topic and added important information. **Results and Discussion:** The analysis of the data obtained shows that there is a presence of disorders arising from food selectivity in autistic people, the articles reveal that among the diseases there is a higher prevalence of gastrointestinal disorders (88.9%), followed by overweight and obesity (33, 3%), smaller losses were found in metabolic disorders (22.2%) and sleep disorders (11.1%). Based on the studies, it is noted that food selectivity can be correlated with different conditions. Such comorbidities can directly affect the individual's life and health, as it changes their daily life. **Final considerations:** Based on the findings, it is observed that it is extremely important that care is provided in conjunction with an interdisciplinary team so that means can be devised to improve the nutrition of autistic people and thus, successively, reduce future damage.

DESCRIPTORS: Autism Spectrum Disorder; Food Fussiness; Health Risk.

RESUMEN

Introducción: El trastorno del espectro autista (TEA) es un trastorno del desarrollo caracterizado por afecciones neurológicas atípicas que pueden afectar la comunicación, la interacción social y los patrones repetitivos de un individuo. También impacta significativamente los hábitos alimenticios de muchas personas con el trastorno a través de la alimentación selectiva, una condición que afecta directamente su salud, causando diversas enfer-

medades como deficiências nutricionais y enfermedades del tracto gastrointestinal. **Metodología:** Se realizó una revisión integrativa utilizando contenido de artículos científicos seleccionados a través de plataformas de investigación como SciELO, revistas CAPES, PubMed y BVS, que abordaron el tema y proporcionaron información importante. **Resultados y discusión:** El análisis de los datos obtenidos muestra la presencia de trastornos derivados de la alimentación selectiva en individuos autistas. Los artículos revelan que entre las enfermedades, hay una mayor prevalencia de trastornos gastrointestinales (88,9%), seguido de sobrepeso y obesidad (33,3%). Se encontró un deterioro menos significativo en los trastornos metabólicos (22,2%) y trastornos del sueño (11,1%). Con base en los estudios, se observa que la alimentación selectiva puede correlacionarse con diversas condiciones. Estas comorbilidades pueden afectar directamente la vida y la salud del individuo, ya que modifican su rutina diaria. **Consideraciones finales:** A partir de los hallazgos, se observa que es fundamental brindar atención en conjunto con un equipo interdisciplinario para identificar maneras de mejorar la dieta de las personas autistas y, así, reducir los daños futuros.

DESCRIPTORES: Trastorno del Espectro Autista; Irritabilidad Alimentaria; Riesgo a la Salud.

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INTRODUCTION

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that has been widely discussed in recent years. This disorder is characterized by a neurological condition that can affect speech, communication, social interaction, and behavior, as well as causing repetitive patterns, stereotypical behaviors, and restricted interests. Cases can also be observed where the indi-

vidual exhibits aggressive and obsessive-compulsive reactions, anxiety, hyperactivity, attention deficit, eating disorders, and sleep disorders^[1]. ASD is more prevalent in males, so gender is a risk factor for this condition, but the cause for this prevalence has not yet been identified^[2].

The estimated prevalence of ASD cases is believed to be 1 case in every 44 births, and in Brazil, it is estimated that there are about 2 million people with Autism Spectrum Disorder^[3].

According to the DSM-5^[4] (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) (APA, 2014), ASD is divided into three levels of support, which are: Level 1: little need for support; Level 2: moderate need for support; Level 3: high need for support. Based on the diagnosis, the level of support is defined so that the individual's follow-up and treatment are more effective.

Among the levels of autism support, food selectivity can be observed

in many individuals, that is, difficulty accepting or refusal of varied foods. This is due to restricted interests and repetitions that are striking characteristics of the disorder. Autistic individuals are selective and resistant to new things, making it difficult to include diverse foods in their diet^[5].

Food selectivity can be characterized as a triad, consisting of "poor appetite, food refusal, and disinterest in food." Another associated factor is the stress involved in mealtimes, as the abrupt introduction of new foods can cause the autistic individual to become stressed and, as a result, develop greater resistance to accepting new foods^[6].

In addition, individuals with ASD may experience sensory changes that are divided into: sensory sensitivity (refusal to eat food due to its texture and taste); tactile sensory sensitivity (refusal to touch food); and olfactory sensory sensitivity (smelling food and not consuming it). This can directly or indirectly affect eating habits^[7]. Therefore, in both neurotypical and neuroatypical individuals, food selectivity can cause various nutritional deficiencies, leading to a lack of vitamins and minerals that are essential for life. In addition to these deficiencies, studies indicate that some gastrointestinal disorders are also quite common in autistic people, including esophageal reflux, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and constipation^[8]. Therefore, it is extremely important that the diet of autistic individuals be monitored by professionals, especially nutritionists, and that their selective eating habits be discussed in order to avoid nutritional disorders or other health problems.

In view of the above, it is necessary to highlight the importance of this study, since food selectivity is one of the most prevalent and striking characteristics of ASD, and one of the most common concerns due to the damage it can cause to an individual's

health. However, it is also important to highlight the lack of studies on this topic, meaning that this study may serve in the future to encourage new research and support the planning of actions that seek to resolve this problem.

Thus, this study highlights which health problems are related to food selectivity in autistic individuals. Its general objective is: to identify the damage caused to the health of autistic individuals by selective eating, and its specific objectives are: to discuss autism spectrum disorder and levels of support; to describe selective eating in autistic individuals; to identify the main conditions and diseases caused by selective eating.

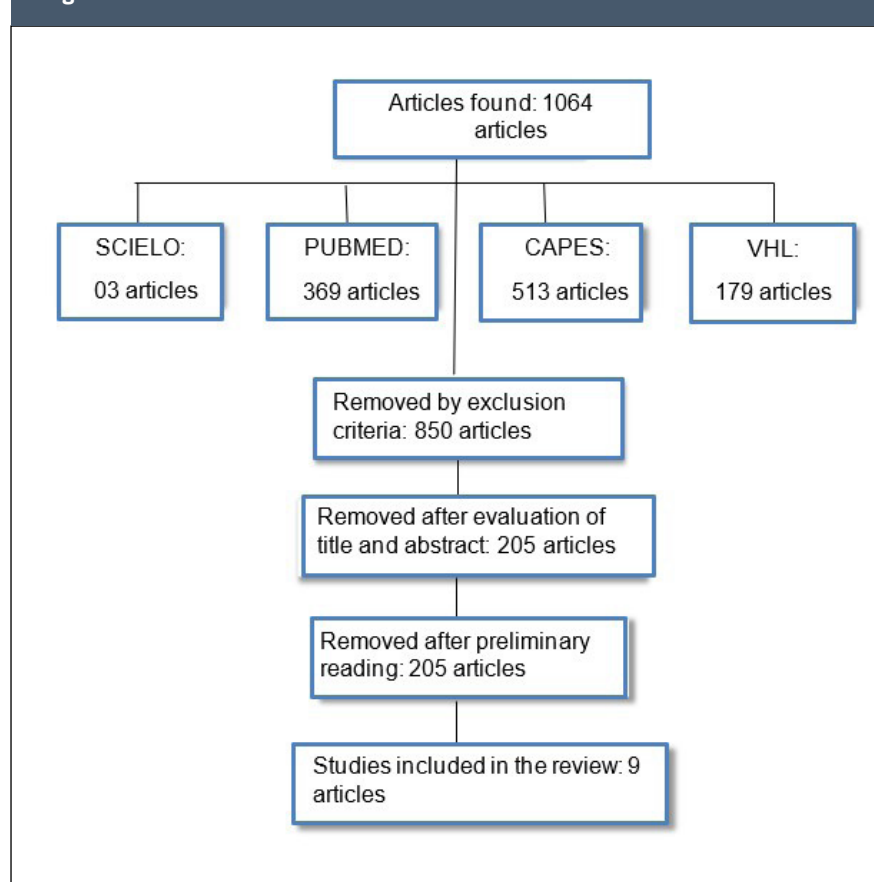
MATERIALS AND METHODS

TYPE OF RESEARCH

This research is an integrative, exploratory, and cross-sectional review. The study was based on the content of scientific articles selected from databases such as SciELO, CAPES journals, PubMed, and BVS. The Health Sciences Descriptors (DecCS/MESH) used were: autism AND "food selectivity" and autism AND "food selectivity."

The search criteria included articles in English and Portuguese related to the topic, published between 2018 and 2023. Exclusion criteria included works that did not present content relevant to the research topic. Approximately 1,064 articles were found, which, after reading and indexing, were used to prepare the results and discussions.

Figure 1: Flowchart



Source: own authorship, 2024.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results found show that there are

several health problems related to selective eating in autistic individuals, which can contribute negatively to the gradual

emergence of other conditions and diseases.

Table 1: results of selected articles			
	TITLE	METHODOLOGY / YEAR	RESULTS
1	Excess weight and gastrointestinal symptoms in a group of autistic children.	Cross-sectional and descriptive study, 2020.	Overweight, reflux, gas, bloating, diarrhea, and constipation.
2	Interest in food and triglyceride concentrations in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder.	Cross-sectional study, 2021.	Overweight and hyperlipidemia.
3	Weight status and risk factors associated with mealtime behaviors among children with autism spectrum disorder.	Cross-sectional study, 2022.	Constipation, diarrhea, abdominal pain, vomiting, obesity, and overweight.
4	Gastrointestinal disorders and food selectivity: relationship with sleep and challenging behavior in children with autism spectrum disorder	Single-center observational study, 2023.	Hypochromic anemia and hypovitaminosis (B12), constipation, and sleep disorders.
5	Eating behavior of children with autism spectrum disorder	Prospective, cross-sectional, descriptive, and analytical study, 2023.	Abdominal pain, constipation, esophageal reflux, and diarrhea.
6	Increased monocytes are associated with excess weight in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder.	Cross-sectional study, 2023.	Overweight and immune dysfunction.
7	Eating behavior and nutritional profile of children with autism spectrum disorder in a reference center in the Amazon.	Cross-sectional, descriptive, and analytical study, 2024.	Constipation, gas and abdominal distension.
8	Clinical correlates and prevalence of food selectivity in children with autism spectrum disorder.	Cross-sectional study, 2024.	Constipation and esophageal reflux.
9	Food intake and gastrointestinal symptoms are altered in children with autism spectrum disorder: the relative contribution of autism-related traits.	Cross-sectional study, 2024.	Constipation, diarrhea, gas, and abdominal pain
7	Comportamento alimentar e perfil nutricional de crianças com transtorno do espectro autista em centro de referência na Amazônia.	Estudo transversal, descritivo e analítico, 2024.	Constipação, gases e distensão abdominal.
8	Correlatos clínicos e prevalência de seletividade alimentar em crianças com transtorno do espectro do autismo.	Estudo transversal, 2024.	Constipação e refluxo esofágico.
9	A ingestão alimentar e os sintomas gastrointestinais estão alterados em crianças com Transtorno do Espectro do Autismo: a contribuição relativa dos traços ligados ao autismo.	Estudo transversal, 2024.	Constipação, diarreia, gases e dor abdominal

Source: Own work, 2024.

Based on the research findings described in Table 1, it was possible to show that the highest prevalence of disorders related to food selectivity is related to the gastrointestinal tract, accounting for 88.9% of the studies, followed by problems related to excessive weight gain such as obesity and overweight, representing 33.3% of the studies. Metabolic disorders were also observed in 22.2% of the studies, and sleep disorders in 11.1%.

Food selectivity is one of the most common characteristics in individuals with ASD, occurring most frequently in early childhood, when new foods with different flavors and textures are introduced. The refusal of food by individuals with ASD can often be accompanied by atypical behaviors such as crying, various tantrums, and denial of food^{[9][10]}.

Based on current studies, it is clear that food selectivity in autistic individuals is correlated with various problems and diseases that affect their health. In the selected articles, the authors predominantly cite the prevalence of gastrointestinal disorders, but it is also possible to observe the presence of other comorbidities, such as excess weight, sleep disorders, and metabolic disorders.

Given that food selection is entirely linked to texture and consistency, there is partial acceptance of fruits and vegetables. On the other hand, selectivity increases the taste for sweets, snacks, and other ultra-processed foods, as they attract attention for their crunchy consistency, texture, color, and eye-catching shape, causing a reduction in the nutritional content of meals and leading to nutritional deficiencies in individuals^[11].

Predominantly, the articles presented show results related to gastrointestinal disorders in individuals with ASD. Of the nine articles presented, eight refer to gastrointestinal symptoms as the most recurrent impairment caused by food selectivity, a

condition caused by restrictions and repetitive behaviors at mealtimes. Among the symptoms described, the authors cited constipation, esophageal reflux, gas, abdominal distension, vomiting, and diarrhea.

These changes in the gastrointestinal tract occur because autistic individuals have a different intestinal microbiota than neurotypical individuals, which, due to food selectivity, is altered, predisposing them to more recurrent and easier gastrointestinal symptoms^[11].

In agreement with these findings, Cardoso *et al.*^[9] cite that gastrointestinal problems are present in about 12% of autistic individuals. In most cases, the symptoms are chronic diarrhea, constipation, reflux, excessive flatulence, and abdominal distension.

In addition to nutritional deficiencies, articles 1, 2, 3, and 6 of the table show that many individuals with ASD may end up becoming overweight or even obese due to high consumption of empty calories (foods low in nutrients and high in sugars, simple carbohydrates, and saturated fats), which are a direct consequence of selective eating.

Most autistic people need routines because they are very resistant to change. They often exhibit repetitive and stereotypical behaviors, constant use of a single object, echolalia, difficulty with change, especially in their routine, and limited interests in specific things (hyperfocus). When subjected to changes in their daily lives, they may exhibit various reactions, including sleep disorders^[12].

The author of article 4 of the table highlights the high prevalence of sleep disorders in autistic individuals and reports believing that there is a correlation between sleep disorders, gastrointestinal disorders, and food selectivity. In addition, individuals with ASD may be at greater risk of developing heart and metabolic diseases than neurotypical people^[13].

It can therefore be understood that poor nutrition and insufficient intake of vitamins, fiber, and other nutrients in an individual's diet can predispose them to metabolic disorders, as there is not adequate consumption of nutrients to maintain the proper functioning of the body.

It was also possible to observe in the research of articles 4 and 6 of the table that the individuals analyzed presented metabolic disorders, such as anemia, vitamin B12 deficiency, and high monocyte counts, which can ultimately lead to immune dysfunction in individuals.

Therefore, the health problems related to individuals with ASD, caused, among other factors, by food selectivity, are evident. The various problems addressed can directly impact the life and health of autistic individuals, modifying and/or preventing their well-being. For these reasons, multidisciplinary monitoring of these individuals is necessary from the time of diagnosis to mitigate or prevent possible damage to their health.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Given the findings in this study, it is possible to observe that there are several health problems that correlate with the selective behavior of autistic individuals at mealtimes. Restricting foods with high nutritional content and excessive consumption of high-calorie foods is a risk factor for the development of various conditions and diseases, some of which have the potential to become chronic and cause significant damage throughout the individual's life.

Individuals with ASD can be understood not only as socially vulnerable, but also as more vulnerable to developing various health conditions and diseases due to their food avoidance behavior.

In view of the above, it is necessary to emphasize the need for these autis-

tic individuals to receive high-quality, comprehensive care from a y, multi-disciplinary team in order to mitigate

the damage caused by selective eating through strategies that facilitate food introduction, thereby increasing the

individual's nutritional support and improving their quality of life and health.

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