

Abstract

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Celiac disease presenting as autism.

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BACKGROUND: Gluten-restricted diets have become increasingly popular among parents seeking treatment for children diagnosed with autism. Some of the reported response to celiac diets in children with autism may be related to amelioration of nutritional deficiency resulting from undiagnosed gluten sensitivity and consequent malabsorption.

FINDINGS: A case is presented of a 5-year-old boy diagnosed with severe autism at a specialty clinic for autistic spectrum disorders. After initial investigation suggested underlying celiac disease and varied nutrient deficiencies, a gluten-free diet was instituted along with dietary and supplemental measures to secure nutritional sufficiency. The patient's gastrointestinal symptoms rapidly resolved, and signs and symptoms suggestive of autism progressively abated.

CONCLUSION: This case is an example of a common malabsorption syndrome associated with central nervous system dysfunction and suggests that in some contexts, nutritional deficiency may be a determinant of developmental delay. It is recommended that all children with neurodevelopmental problems be assessed for nutritional deficiency and malabsorption syndromes.

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