Autism Spectrum Disorder Screening during the COVID-19 Pandemic in a Large Primary Care Network

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OBJECTIVE: To assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on screening for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and screening equity among eligible children presenting for well-child care in a large primary care pediatric network, we compared rates of ASD screening completion and positivity during the pandemic to the year prior, stratified by sociodemographic factors. METHODS: Patients who presented for in-person well-child care at 16 to 26 months between March 1, 2020 and February 28, 2021 (COVID-19 cohort, n = 24,549) were compared to those who presented between March 1, 2019 and February 29, 2020 (pre-COVID-19 cohort, n = 26,779). Demographics and rates of completion and positivity of the Modified Checklist for Autism in Toddlers with Follow-up (M-CHAT/F) were calculated from the electronic health record and compared by cohort using logistic regression models. RESULTS: Total eligible visits decreased by 8.3% between cohorts, with a greater decline in Black and publicly insured children. In the pre-COVID-19 cohort, 89.0% of eligible children were screened at least once, compared to 86.4% during the pandemic (P < 0.001). Significant declines in screening completion were observed across all sociodemographic groups except among Asian children, with the sharpest declines among non-Hispanic White children. Sociodemographic differences were not observed in screen-positive rates by cohort. CONCLUSIONS: Well-child visits and ASD screenings declined across groups, but with different patterns by race and ethnicity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings regarding screen-completion rates should not be interpreted as a decline in screening disparities, given differences in who presented for care. Strategies for catch-up screening for all children should be considered.

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