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Recent News

Two studies find defect in gene for Parkinson's

Archived (2005)

(01/26/06) By Kathleen Fackelmann, USA TODAY

Archived (2004)

An error in a single gene might cause many cases of Parkinson's disease in certain groups, including Ashkenazi Jews and Arabs, two studies report on Thursday.

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Previously, genes for Parkinson's disease have been identified only in rare cases. But findings from the scientific papers, both of which were published in the New England Journal of Medicine, suggest that for certain ethnic groups, the disease could carry a substantial genetic component.

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Identification of the genetic mutation might help scientists better understand how Parkinson's damages the brain and causes symptoms of the disease, says J. William Langston of the Parkinson's Institute in Sunnyvale, Calif. The discovery also might lead to better therapies for Parkinson's, he says. The disease strikes about 40,000 Americans each year.

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Other Parkinson's Community News

Susan Bressman, a neurologist at New York's Beth Israel Medical Center, Laurie Ozelius, a molecular geneticist at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, and their colleagues studied 120 Parkinson's patients and 317 healthy people. All were Ashkenazi, or Eastern European, Jews.

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The team zeroed in on a gene called LRRK2 that previously has been shown to have mutations that cause Parkinson's in some families. When the team looked for one of the more common mutations, they found it in 18% of the Jewish patients.

When they looked only at patients who had a family history of the disease, they got a more dramatic result: The mutation was found in nearly 30% of such cases.

The researchers also found the mutation in 1% of controls: Ashkenazi Jews in their 70s who remained healthy. The team estimates that about 70,000 Ashkenazi Jews in the USA could be carriers of the mutation; they might escape the disease, or they could develop symptoms late in life, Bressman says.

She and other experts believe people with an inherited vulnerability also might need exposure to an environmental factor to get the disease.

The second study suggests the same mutation frequently can be found in Parkinson's patients of Arab descent.

The studies might change the way people of Jewish or Arab descent are diagnosed, Bressman says. But she doesn't recommend widespread testing just yet.

"We don't have a cure for Parkinson's right now," she says, and there also is no known way to prevent it.

A positive test in family members might simply raise worries about developing the disease in the future, says Robin Elliott of the Parkinson Disease Foundation.

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