

HEALTH

Study: Parkinson's disease not inherited

CHICAGO (AP) — Following a landmark study of more than 17,000 twins, researchers recently reported that most cases of Parkinson's disease are not due to a genetic defect but are caused by factors that are likely environmental.

"For the first time, today we can say that for people with Parkinson's disease diagnosed after age 50, it's most commonly caused by environmental factors," said Dr. Caroline Tanner of the Parkinson's Institute in Sunnyvale, Calif., who led the study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association two weeks ago.

The environmental factors are unknown but may include chemical exposures, diet and smoking — the last of which paradoxically seems to lessen the risk of developing Parkinson's, she said.

At least 1 million Americans have Parkinson's, Tanner said, making it second only to Alzheimer's disease in frequency as a degenerative disease of the brain and

nerves. Parkinson causes slow deterioration of the nerves' ability to control the muscles. It usually starts with small tremors, then progresses to a shuffling gait and increasing weakness.

There is no cure, and drug therapy tends to lose effectiveness over time.

A genetic cause is most common in the approximately 10 percent of people with the disease who are diagnosed before age 50, Tanner said. In 1997, researchers identified a long-sought gene defect that can cause a form of Parkinson's, but the proportion of cases arising from the defect was unknown before this study.

In the new study, researchers tracked down more than 17,000 men enrolled in a World War II-era twin registry.

The researchers found 161 twin pairs in which at least one brother had Parkinson's disease and data on the pairs was complete.

Among the 161 sets, there were 16 in which Parkinson's

had struck before age 50. Of the four sets of identical twins — who have exactly the same genetic material — both brothers had Parkinson's.

Among the 12 fraternal pairs, who share only half their genetic material, there were only two in which both brothers had Parkinson's.

Researchers calculated that if one twin developed the disease by age 50, the other was six times more likely to get it if he were an identical twin than if he were a fraternal twin.

Tanner said environmental factors most likely to play a role in typical Parkinson's include exposure to chemicals such as pesticides and herbicides, diet and tobacco smoking.

The apparent protective effect of smoking was found in the twins and in previous research, Tanner said.

She and Dr. J. William Langston, president of the Parkinson's Institute and senior author, said the protection is probably real, perhaps caused by smoking's stimulation of the liver to

produce enzymes that neutralize some toxin that would otherwise provoke Parkinson's.

"But there are about 2,000 chemicals in cigarette smoke, so we still have a big job ahead of us in finding what chemicals might actually be protective," Langston said.

"And we don't recommend smoking to prevent Parkinson's disease."

An expert not involved in the study said it presents a compelling reason to search for better treatments, since the drugs now available may lessen symptoms but don't really attack the disease or prevent disability.

And surgery is promising but still largely experimental, noted Dr. Jeffrey Cummings of the University of California, Los Angeles.

In an editorial accompanying the study, he recommended that the new findings should refocus research on environmental triggers for typical Parkinson's disease and genetic influences in early-onset disease.

First AIDS vaccine test begun in Africa

WASHINGTON (AP) — The first test of a human AIDS vaccine in Africa has begun in Uganda, says the U.S. National Institutes of Health, which is funding the study.

Several attempts at AIDS vaccines have been tested in various countries, particularly the United States, where the most advanced study of another possible vaccine candidate is under way.

But last week's announcement was pegged as an important step toward developing a vaccine for countries hardest hit by the epidemic. AIDS has devastated Africa. In Uganda alone, it has killed nearly a half-million people and left 1 million children orphaned.

The Uganda study tests a vaccine made by Pasteur Merieux Connaught that uses a canarypox virus to carry three HIV genes. The canarypox cannot cause human disease, and the HIV genes by themselves aren't infectious, the NIH said.

The vaccine, known as ALVAC, already has undergone safety testing in about 800 people in the United States and France with no serious side effects reported.

But the NIH's question is whether the vaccine's genes — taken from a subtype of HIV found in the United States and Europe — will trigger a protective immune response to the different HIV subtypes found in Africa.

The yearlong study is enrolling 40 healthy adults at low risk of getting HIV. Twenty will get the experimental vaccine.

Researchers in Kampala and Entebbe will monitor safety reactions and immune system changes that would indicate whether the vaccine has anti-HIV potential. If so, larger studies could follow.

Miller names Perkins to Nursing Board

Congratulations to Ms. Dorothy Perkins! Before leaving office former Gov. Bob Miller appointed Perkins as a certified nursing assistant member on the Nevada State Board of Nursing to replace Eleanor Zamora, who moved out of state.

Perkins is a nursing assistant for the Clark County Health District, where she has worked for nearly 25 years. Before the appointment, she was a member of the CNA Advisory Committee. The seven-member board is comprised of four registered nurses, one practical nurse, one certified nursing assistant and one consumer. The governor appoints the members for four-year voluntary terms. Perkins has lived in Las Vegas for 27 years. She has two sons, Preston, 26 and Wade, 21, and four grandchildren. Some may recognize Wade as the starting cornerback for the Missouri Tigers.



DOROTHY PERKINS

Poor Kids not screened for lead

WASHINGTON (AP) — An estimated 400,000 poor children with elevated lead levels in their blood were not screened under Medicaid and other federal health programs despite federal law that requires such testing, congressional investigators say.

Nationally, about 890,000 children have elevated lead levels, and most do not know it, the General Accounting Office concluded in a report Tuesday.

"This is a health tragedy. Lead poisoning is a preventable disease," said Rep. Henry Waxman, D-Calif., who requested the report.

It found that 82 percent of children ages 1 to 5 in federal programs were not screened for lead. And high blood levels were five times as common for children served by Medicaid, federally supported health centers and the Women, Infants and Children program. Lower-income children have a greater risk of lead poisoning.

The report from the research arm of

Congress echoes a similar GAO study a year ago.

At high levels, lead can cause a variety of debilitating health problems, including seizure, coma and even death. At lower levels, lead can affect a child's intelligence and ability to learn.

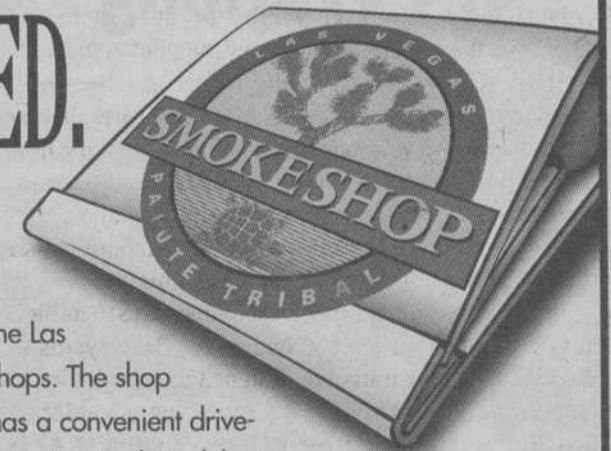
Screening is a critical element in eliminating childhood lead poisoning because in most cases there are no obvious symptoms.

Screening rates ranged from less than 1 percent of Medicaid children in Washington state to about 46 percent in Alabama.

In 1989, Congress passed legislation requiring lead screening as part of Medicaid's special preventive health program for poor children.

Sen. Robert Torricelli, D-N.J., said Tuesday he would reintroduce legislation requiring states to provide a minimum number of screenings and establishing penalties for failure.

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