

Health

Alzheimer's kins at risk

'Punch drunk syndrome' & Alz's key details found

LONDON, March 21, (RTRS): Scientists studying damaged brains of boxers and other sports people have found key details about a head injury-linked disease called "punch drunk syndrome" that could help the development of new diagnostics and treatments for Alzheimer's.

The syndrome, also known as chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), is linked to repeated blows to the head and causes a type of dementia similar to Alzheimer's, which is characterised by behavioural changes, confusion and memory loss.

CTE can affect people who play contact sports such as boxing, rugby, soccer and football, but can currently be diagnosed only after death, since brain tissues have to be removed and analysed to confirm presence of the disease.

Like Alzheimer's - a brain-wasting condition that affects up to 50 million people worldwide - CTE features the abnormal build-up of certain proteins in the brain. One of those, tau, forms filaments that clump up in tangles inside cells.

Abnormal

In this study, published in the journal Nature on Wednesday, researchers from Britain's Medical Research Council Laboratory of Molecular Biology (LMB) were able to detail the atomic structures of the abnormal tau filaments in CTE.

"Our new knowledge of these structures could make it possible to diagnose CTE in living patients by developing tracer compounds that will specifically bind to the tau filaments of CTE," said Michel Goedert, an LMB researcher who co-led the study.

The research involved scientists extracting tau filaments from the brains of three people with CTE post-mortem - one former professional American football player and two former professional boxers.

The filaments were then imaged using a technique known as cryo-electron microscopy. The team found that while the tau structures from the three patients with CTE were identical, they were also differ-

ent from those seen in Alzheimer's. This could in future help doctors distinguish between various forms of dementia when diagnosing patients, the team said, and also furthers understanding of how and why tau forms disease-specific clumps and folds.

"We don't know the chemical nature of these molecules yet, but we suspect they may play a role in the assembly of tau into filaments, and that their abundance may determine why some individuals develop CTE and others do not," said Sjors Scheres, who co-led the work.

He said the next stage of research will be to identify those molecules and understand more about their role in tau build-up.



Having second- or third-degree relatives with Alzheimer's raises a person's risk of developing the disease, a new study suggests.

It's already known that children of Alzheimer's patients are at higher risk for the disease. But in the new study, people with Alzheimer's in their extended family were also at a higher risk of the disease compared to those with no family history, researchers report in Neurology.

The more closely related the relatives with Alzheimer's, and the greater their number, the higher an individual's risk of developing the disease. "The big picture message is that this reiterates how important and powerful (both close and distant) family history can be for risk prediction," said the study's lead author, Lisa Cannon-Albright of the University of Utah School of Medicine in Salt Lake City.

The new study was possible only because Cannon-Albright and her colleagues were able to tap into a very complete genealogy, the Utah Population Database, which includes information on families dating back to the original pioneers who settled the state in the 1800s.

The family histories are linked to Utah death certificates, which show not only a cause of death, but also other contributing causes in the majority of cases.

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Women have better self-care skills than men

Living alone may not worsen heart disease

NEW YORK, March 21, (RTRS): For people with well-controlled heart disease, living alone isn't linked with a higher risk of cardiovascular problems, a large study suggests.

For five years, researchers tracked more than 32,000 patients from 45 countries. All were living with stable coronary artery disease, which means the arteries that carry blood to the heart were narrowed or clogged but hadn't been causing problems for at least several months. About 11 percent of study participants lived alone.

After accounting for factors that might influence the risk of heart problems - such as age, sex, smoking status, and diabetes - the researchers found that overall, compared to participants who lived with other people, those living alone had no higher risk for heart attacks, strokes, heart failure or death.

Researchers did see a difference between men and women, however. Men

living alone had a 17 percent higher risk for major adverse cardiovascular events, according to the report in the journal Heart.

"Men living alone who previously were married or cohabited with women may not have as strong coping mechanisms or social supports," lead author Dr. Sumeet Gandhi of St Michael's Hospital and the University of Toronto told Reuters Health.

Nurturing

The researchers also highlight some findings that were not statistically significant, meaning they could have been coincidental and need closer study. For instance, women living alone tended to have a lower risk of heart attack compared with women or men living with others.

"Historically, women manage the household and assume a nurturing role and may develop superior self-care skills than their male counterparts,"

Gandhi and colleagues write. "Women socialize differently than men and may form stronger social networks... relying less on spousal support compared with men."

Another possibly coincidental finding was that patients age 75 and older who lived alone tended to have lower risks for heart attack and stroke, whereas people under age 65 who lived alone tended to have higher risks.

The authors suggest that younger participants' social interactions may be more pressured, resulting in poor health behavior, while patients above the age 75 living independently may be relatively healthy.

Previous research has suggested that patients living alone may be at increased risk of cardiovascular events. The new results may be the result of improved healthcare and better follow-up, the authors say.

The study wasn't designed to prove whether living situations affect

the course of heart disease. Furthermore, the researchers lacked information on patients' economic status, their proximity to support systems and resources, and whether they suffered from depression or stress. Gandhi said further studies are needed to consider these and other important variables.

Having this information "may help guide future potential psychosocial interventions," he added.

Dr Gregory Marcus, Director of Clinical Research for the Division of Cardiology at the University of California, San Francisco, who wasn't involved in the study, commented to Reuters Health that on the one hand, people who live alone are more likely self-sufficient and in relatively good shape. But on the other hand, older people living alone with severe forms of disease will inevitably face problems, with no one to monitor them.

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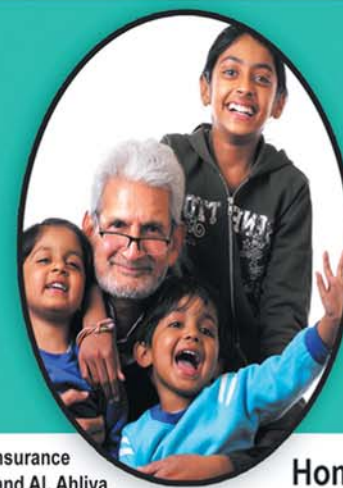
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