

BEHAVIOR

Depression puffs up lung cancer . . .

Several controversial studies have suggested that people who experience bouts of depression run a greater risk of developing all sorts of cancers, possibly because depression weakens the immune system's ability to control the spread of cancerous cells.

Now, a long-term investigation conducted in Finland casts doubt on those sweeping conclusions. Overall, new cases of cancer do not crop up disproportionately among people who have endured moderate to severe depression, investigators report in the Dec. 15 *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY*. However, lung cancer does develop more frequently in depressed men, the scientists find. The underlying link in some cases may be that the mood disturbance encourages depressed men to smoke more cigarettes rather than that it depresses the immune system or has some other biological effect.

Paul Knekt, an epidemiologist at the National Public Health Institute in Helsinki, directed the study of 7,018 men and women. Participants, who entered the project between 1978 and 1980 showing no signs of any cancer, filled out medical and psychiatric questionnaires. In late 1991, the investigators tallied the cases of cancer that had been diagnosed in volunteers.

Men who initially reported that in the weeks before they enrolled in the study they had experienced symptoms of depression, such as feelings of hopelessness or loss of interest in daily activities, displayed a markedly higher lung cancer rate 11 to 14 years later than nondepressed men did. This finding held when the researchers controlled statistically for age, weight, cholesterol concentration, amount of exercise, and use of cigarettes, alcohol, and antidepressant drugs.

Moreover, lung cancer rates were highest among the severely depressed men who smoked cigarettes, Knekt's group finds.

Lung cancer afflicted too few women in the study to allow for a comparable statistical analysis, the researchers add.

Other studies indicate that depressed cigarette smokers tend to smoke heavily and find it especially difficult to kick their habit, remarks epidemiologist Gary D. Friedman of Kaiser Permanente Medical Care Program in Oakland, Calif., in an accompanying editorial. Their attachment to cigarette smoking, rather than mood-inspired immune breakdowns, most likely accounts for the link between depression and lung cancer, Friedman argues.

— B.B.