

New data question panic, suicide relation

You've experienced the sensation before, but it never gets any easier. A sudden rush of fear courses through your body. Your heart beats wildly and pounds painfully against your chest. The room starts to spin and you feel like you might be going crazy. You're having another panic attack.

To top it off, these recurrent symptoms may also signal a heightened tendency to attempt suicide. A random national sample of adults suggested a few years ago that one in five persons reporting repeated panic attacks, also known as panic disorder, has also attempted suicide, a strikingly high rate comparable to that observed for persons with severe depression (SN: 11/4/89, p.293). But new evidence, published in the May *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY*, points to a much weaker link between panic disorder and suicide attempts.

Five of 234 people treated only for panic disorder at two outpatient mental health clinics had attempted suicide or entertained serious thoughts about killing themselves, a rate of 2 percent, assert psychologist Steven Friedman of the State University of New York Health Science Center at Brooklyn and his colleagues. That number exceeds the 1 percent rate of suicide attempts among people with no psychiatric disorders but falls far short of the 20 percent rate associated with panic disorder in the national sample.

Several factors may account for the discrepant findings, Friedman's group contends. A history of other psychiatric disorders among individuals with panic disorder in the national sample may have magnified their distress to the point where they considered suicide, the researchers suggest. Participants in the national sample reported panic attacks for the previous six months but cited suicide attempts over their lifetimes, they note.

Data from the new study support this possibility. Among patients treated at the same two outpatient clinics, 14 of 59 suffering from panic disorder as well as borderline personality disorder had attempted suicide, a rate of 25 percent. Symptoms of the latter condition include emotionally volatile relationships, feelings that life is empty or chaotic, alcohol and drug abuse, and repeated suicidal threats.

In both the national and outpatient studies, women with panic disorder and histories of alcohol and drug abuse proved most likely to report at least one suicide attempt, the scientists add.

Panic disorder sufferers in the national sample may also have been unaware that treatments exist for their condition, thus stoking feelings of demoralization and helplessness that contribute to suicidal

thoughts and actions, Friedman's group argues.

In the outpatient study, experienced clinicians at the two facilities reviewed intake interviews and medical charts of panic disorder patients admitted over the past decade. A majority of those treated reported thinking about death, but usually in connection with fears of dying experienced during a panic attack.

A similar review of outpatient records, reported in the September 1991 *AMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHIATRY* by psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School in Philadelphia and his co-workers, identified only one

Vitamin A-like drug may ward off cancers

A synthetic vitamin A-like substance may help stabilize a precancerous condition of the mouth that often afflicts smokers. In fact, researchers believe the new drug treatment may also play a role in preventing full-blown oral cancer and other types of malignancies.

In 1986, a research group at the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center in Houston first reported using the synthetic substance, called 13-cis-retinoic acid, to treat leukoplakia — whitish patches of skin in the mouth that can turn malignant.

However, the study also found that in many patients, the precancerous skin patches returned soon after the patients stopped taking the drug. In addition, many study participants reported troubling side effects such as redness of the eyes and dryness of the mouth.

The same team has tackled leukoplakia again. This time, Waun Ki Hong, Scott M. Lippman and their colleagues wanted to see if they could prolong the preventive benefits of the drug while minimizing its side effects.

The team designed a clinical trial in which 53 people with leukoplakia received a very large dose of 13-cis-retinoic acid for three months. Then the researchers randomly assigned the study participants to nine months of maintenance therapy with either a low dose of 13-cis-retinoic acid or beta carotene, a natural vitamin A precursor found in many orange fruits and vegetables.

The Texas group tested beta carotene because it produces virtually no side effects and is converted to vitamin A in the body. Beta carotene and 13-cis-retinoic acid both belong to a family of compounds known as the retinoids. Scientists believe retinoids may help stave off cancer by slowing the growth of premalignant cells.

The new study represents the first long-term comparison of 13-cis-retinoic acid and beta carotene. The researchers

found that premalignant changes progressed in just two of 24 patients (8 percent) assigned to 13-cis-retinoic acid. However, the beta carotene strategy didn't pay off: 16 of the 29 persons taking beta carotene (55 percent) experienced a steady advance of their premalignant condition.

Lippman and Hong reported their data last week in San Diego at the joint meeting of the American Society of Clinical Oncology and the American Association for Cancer Research.

About 8 percent of Americans will develop leukoplakia, which often strikes smokers and heavy drinkers. The standard treatment for the condition is surgery, but this approach doesn't work for premalignant patches that have spread over large areas of the mouth.

The new study is part of a body of work that suggest retinoids may help prevent cancer, comments Michael Sporn of the National Cancer Institute in Bethesda, Md. Sporn's own work suggests that retinoids may help spur immature cells to mature and thus stop the out-of-control growth that characterizes cancer.

This preventive strategy may work with other types of cancer as well.

Two years ago, Hong's team reported in the Sept. 20, 1990 *NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE* that 13-cis-retinoic acid helped prevent a second bout with cancer in people who had been treated for head and neck tumors. Such people, who are often smokers, run a high risk of developing another cancer after undergoing surgery to remove their primary tumor, Hong says.

Despite the promise that retinoids display, much work remains before doctors can recommend a cancer-preventing pill for their patients. In the meantime, Sporn warns against popping massive quantities of vitamin A in an attempt to ward off cancer. Large doses of this nutrient can cause liver damage and other severe side effects, he notes. — K.A. Fackelmann