

MS can affect children's IQ, thinking skills

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Multiple sclerosis (MS) typically starts in young adulthood, but about five percent of cases start in childhood or the teen years. Children with MS are at risk to exhibit low IQ scores and problems with memory, attention and other thinking skills, according to a study published in the May 13, 2008, issue of *Neurology*, the medical journal of the American Academy of Neurology.

Children who developed the disease at a younger age were more likely to have low IQ scores than children who were older when the disease started.

“It’s possible that MS can show an even more dramatic effect on the thinking skills and intelligence in children than in adults, since the disease might affect the brain at a time when it is still developing,” said study author Maria Pia Amato, MD, of the University of Florence in Italy.

For the study, 63 children under age 18 with MS were compared to 57 healthy children of similar ages. The participants were given 17 tests to measure their overall intelligence, memory, language abilities, and other thinking skills.

Five of the children with MS had very low IQ scores of less than 70; none of the healthy children had a score less than 70. Fifteen of the children with MS had IQ scores between 70 and 89, compared to two of the healthy children. A total of 19 children with MS (31 percent) met the criteria for cognitive impairment by failing at least three of the tests,

while less than five percent of the healthy children failed at least three tests. Unanswered questions from this study include the effects (positive or negative) of MS medications on cognitive function. Also, the possible role of depression in these findings was not systematically assessed.

About 30 percent of the children with MS also had language difficulties, which is not common in adults with MS. “Since the disease occurs during a critical phase for language development, children may be particularly vulnerable to language problems,” Amato said.

Amato said information about the effect of MS on the thinking skills in children and teenagers has been limited. “We need to understand how the disease affects kids so we can help them manage their difficulties and academic challenges,” she said.

Source: American Academy of Neurology

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