

Genetic predisposition may play a role in anxiety disorders

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Finnish scientists have identified genes that may predispose to anxiety disorders. Research conducted under the supervision of Academy Research Fellow Iris Hovatta have focused on genes that influence human behaviour, and some of the studied genes show a statistical association with specific anxiety disorders. The work is carried out as part of the Academy of Finland Research Programme on Neuroscience (NEURO).

Previously Hovatta's team have explored the genetic background of anxiety in experimental models. The current study follows up on these findings in humans using data collected as part of national Health 2000 Survey consisting of 321 individuals who had been diagnosed with anxiety disorder and 653 healthy controls. Hovatta says it was interesting that different genes showed evidence for association to specific types of anxiety disorders, such as panic disorder, social phobias or generalised anxiety disorder. The results will be published in *Biological Psychiatry* in October.

"Environmental factors, such as stressful life events, may trigger an anxiety disorder more easily in people who have a genetic predisposition to the illness," Iris Hovatta says. The focus in the team's further studies will be to understand the molecular and cellular processes that link these genes to the regulation of anxiety behaviour.

Furthermore, the team's international collaborators in Spain and the United States are trying to replicate these findings in their anxiety

disorder datasets to see whether the genes identified by Finnish scientists predispose to anxiety disorders in other populations as well. Only by replicating the results firm conclusions can be drawn about the role of these genes in the predisposition to anxiety in more general.

A closer understanding of the genetics and neurobiology of anxiety disorders is expected to help improve treatment of the illness using both drugs and therapy-based approaches. For the time being, no targeted drugs are available for the treatment of anxiety disorders. Some patients with anxiety disorders do benefit from the currently used medication, but about half of the patients do not.

Source: Academy of Finland

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