

Virus can cause high blood pressure: Chinese study

August 15 2011, by Philip Lim

High blood pressure could be caused by a common virus, according to a study carried out by a team of Chinese doctors which could lead to better treatment for millions of people around the world.

The team from Beijing Chaoyang Hospital's cardiology centre says it has found the first evidence of a link between the human cytomegalovirus (HCMV) and the most commonly occurring form of hypertension, or high blood pressure.

The virus infects most people at some time during their lives, but frequently causes no symptoms, so goes undetected.

One of the report's authors, Yang Xinchun, told AFP the findings could eventually lead to the development of a vaccine to control or prevent high blood pressure.

"If we can get conclusive evidence of the relationship, we can get better medical vaccines and remedies for hypertension," said Yang, head of the cardiology centre.

However, he added that it was "too early" to say when a vaccine could be available and his research was still in its early stages.

"It is the first time someone managed to find this relationship... so we need to undergo more tests with a wider scope of patients," he said.

The study could have widespread health implications -- the World Health Organization says around a billion people worldwide suffer from high blood pressure, including more than 200 million Chinese.

The vast majority experience so-called essential hypertension, which has no proven cause, but has been previously associated with genetic factors and unhealthy lifestyles.

Chinese doctors believe that variety is linked to the HCMV virus.

The results of their study were published in the US medical journal *Circulation*, whose former chief editor James Willerson posted comments on Beijing Chaoyang Hospital's website.

The findings "might present a new strategy for preventing and treating cardiovascular disease," he said.

A recent study led by Jiang He, a professor at the the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine in New Orleans, found that high blood pressure plays a part in 2.3 million cardiovascular deaths in China each year.

Of these 1.3 million were "premature" deaths, meaning they occurred before the age of 72 in men and 75 in women, the average life expectancy in China in 2005.

"Increased blood pressure is the leading preventable risk factor for premature mortality in the Chinese general population," the authors said, describing their findings as "striking and unexpected".

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