Blood test for human form of mad cow disease developed

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(Medical Xpress) -- Mad cow disease is serious business in the U.K., the human form, known as Creutzfeldt-Jakob after Hans Gerhard Creutzfeldt and Alfons Maria Jakob (CJD), who independently first described its existence in humans, (more commonly known as variant CJD, or vCJD), has killed 176 people in that country since 1995, and worse, authorities suspect that thousands more may have it right now. Fortunately, it appears that a blood test has been developed that can identify the prion involved, which until now has only been identifiable via brain autopsies, or sometimes through tonsil biopsies. Currently, there is no cure for vCJD. Those infected lose proper brain function and eventually die within a few months to a couple of years after onset of symptoms. After death, the victims brains appear sponge-like due to the holes left behind as clumps of tissue die. The disease is neither viral nor bacterial and is instead, caused by a prion, which is an infectious type of protein.

Because normal cleansing and cooking processes don't kill the prions, the disease has spread undetected. Antibacterial processes used on surgical implements for performing tonsillectomies for example, don't eliminate the prions, and because those very same prions are associated with tonsils, it is believed many people have been infected when undergoing such procedures.

What's more alarming however is the lack of knowledge regarding blood supplies used for transfusions. Without a test, it's been impossible to know which samples are safe and which aren't. Now however, it appears

researchers in Britain have come up with a blood test. Though no official announcement has been made, various sources say the country's NHS National Prion Clinic, has sent out messages to neurologists across the country indicating that a new blood test is now available. One local news outlet has reportedly spoken with Professor John Collinge, a member of the team that developed the blood test and says that he reports that thus far, no false-positives have occurred.

The next phase of testing will apparently be done on 5,000 blood samples obtained from the United States where the disease is far less common. Such a test should show how often false-positives occur. Sadly, if too many occur, the research team will have to start over.

Because there is no cure, it's not likely that many people will likely opt to be tested if the new test pans out unless they develop symptoms, but it would be used either for all blood donors, or at the least on the blood that is donated, thus sparing countless people from contracting a disease that by all accounts is a truly awful way to go.

More information:
via Channel4

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