

Some chronic viral infections could contribute to cognitive decline with aging

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Certain chronic viral infections could contribute to subtle cognitive deterioration in apparently healthy older adults, according to a study led by researchers from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and Johns Hopkins University that was recently published in the journal *Alzheimer's Disease and Associated Disorders*.

Many cross-sectional studies, which capture information from a single time point, have suggested a link between exposure to cytomegalovirus (CMV) and herpes simplex viruses (HSV) 1 and 2, as well as the protozoa *Toxoplasma gondii* and decreased [cognitive functioning](#), said lead investigator Vishwajit Nimgaonkar, M.D., professor of psychiatry, Pitt School of Medicine.

"Our study is one of the few to assess viral exposure and cognitive functioning measures over a period of time in a group of older adults," he said. "It's possible that these viruses, which can linger in the body long after acute infection, are triggering some neurotoxic effects."

The researchers looked for signs of viral exposures in blood samples that were collected during the "Monongahela-Youghiogheny Healthy Aging Team" (MYHAT) study, in which more than 1,000 participants 65 years and older were evaluated annually for five years to investigate cognitive change over time.

They found CMV, HSV-2 or toxoplasma exposure is associated with different aspects of [cognitive decline](#) in older people that could help

explain what is often considered to be age-related decline.

"This is important from a public health perspective, as these infections are very common and several options for prevention and treatment are available," noted senior investigator Mary Ganguli, M.D., M.P.H., professor of psychiatry at Pitt. "As we learn more about the role that infectious agents play in the brain, we might develop new prevention strategies for [cognitive](#) impairment."

Now, the researchers are trying to determine if there are subgroups of people whose brains are more vulnerable to the effects of [chronic viral infection](#).

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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