

High rates of smoking among schizophrenia patients attributed to nicotine's ameliorative effect

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The smoking rate among individuals with schizophrenia has been shown to be as high as 90 percent, compared to between 20 and 23 percent of the general population, or 50 percent among individuals with other mental disorders.

Uta Waterhouse, who graduates from Victoria next week with a PhD in Psychology, wanted to find out what was driving this unusually high rate.

She examined the addictive effects of nicotine to see if it helped reduce symptoms of [schizophrenia](#), and also looked for commonality in the neurobiological pathways in both addiction and schizophrenia.

"In pre-clinical studies, I found that nicotine improved the cognitive deficits associated with schizophrenia," says Uta. "My findings did not support the theory that both schizophrenia and nicotine addiction share common neurobiological pathways, but it clearly showed that nicotine has a positive effect on the problematic changes to brain function that come with schizophrenia.

"This explains why so many patients with schizophrenia are smokers: It's a way of self-medicating," she explains. "This is particularly important, because at the moment there is no pharmacological treatment for the cognitive deficits—the negative changes in brain function—that are a symptom of schizophrenia. This might be an area that warrants further

exploration by pharmaceutical companies, which could develop medications to suit."

Uta says her findings also raise questions for policymakers. "Current legislation means smoking is not permitted in places like hospitals or other healthcare facilities—my findings show that this ban might be having a greater adverse impact on schizophrenic patients than previously thought."

Provided by Victoria University

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