

# News

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\*\*\*\*Stress factors may play a role in how quickly  
an HIV-infected patient develops AIDS

DALLAS--Positive thinking, social support and stress reduction may help delay the time it takes for a person infected with the AIDS virus to develop the fatal disease, according to a pilot study conducted by Dr. Karl Goodkin at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

Goodkin, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the medical center, presented the results of his biopsychosocial research in a symposium called "Psychoimmunological Factors in Progression of HIV Infection" at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science Jan. 15 in San Francisco.

Since AIDS is a disease that destroys the immune system, physicians generally recommend well-known, common-sense rules for maintaining a healthy immune system, such as getting good nutrition and sufficient sleep and avoiding drugs and alcohol. But Goodkin sought to go beyond these practices to see if stress, social factors and coping styles influenced how rapidly an HIV-infected patient developed full-blown AIDS.

In his study, Goodkin included 40 homosexual males, some of whom were infected with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) -- the virus that causes AIDS -- but were not diagnosed as having full-blown AIDS. (After initial infection with the AIDS virus, a person may remain virtually symptom-free for years before developing AIDS.) Others in the study either were not HIV-infected or had been diagnosed as having AIDS or AIDS-Related Complex (ARC).

The results showed that those who had the virus, but had not progressed to AIDS, had less stress in their lives, more social support, and had more effective ways of coping with stress than either the non-infected group or the group that had progressed to AIDS or ARC.

For several years Goodkin has been doing research on the impact of stress on the development and course of cervical cancer. He has also been studying and teaching about stress and its relationship to other infectious diseases, and now AIDS. He and others have observed that stress can affect the levels of certain

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hormones in the blood. These hormones can cause changes in immune system cells leading to lowered resistance to certain diseases.

Goodkin, who works in the emerging field of mind-body research called psychoneuroimmunology, says, "This research is at the 'descriptive' level at this point and has unknown clinical significance."

Several specific treatments are suggested by the research -- support groups, cognitive therapy to reduce anxiety and depression, relaxation training and exercise. However, these are not yet proven clinically. Nevertheless, Goodkin says there is strong evidence that psychosocial risk factors may hurry the development of ARC or AIDS in HIV-infected patients.

If more research confirms the links between stress and the progression to AIDS, Goodkin says, "Specific treatments could be tailored to patient risk factors and the likelihood that the patient would comply and respond to treatment." Community support groups can help provide social support. Also, cognitive therapy, a kind of psychotherapy emphasizing positive, rational thinking techniques, may help patients who are depressed or anxious without using medications, which sometimes might have undesirable side effects.

Goodkin says, "It may even help for HIV-infected patients to deny to some extent the idea of their eventual disability and death." The idea is to keep their minds focused on productive work and activities.

Helping other people and their community through work as volunteers or on public policy issues may also help HIV-infected patients function better. "These techniques at least help improve the quality, if not the quantity, of life for these patients," says Goodkin.

Goodkin came to UT Southwestern from Stanford University, where he was a research fellow in psychiatry and behavioral sciences. He has both M.D. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Miami in Florida.

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Distribution: AA,AB,AC,AC1,AF,AF1,AG,AG1,AH,AI,AK,AK1,ADM,ADM1,TEX,SL

NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences and Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School.