

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN RESEARCHERS FIND HIGH RATE OF DEPRESSION AMONG INNER-CITY ASTHMA PATIENTS

DALLAS – Aug. 20, 2001 – More than 40 percent of patients in an inner-city asthma clinic suffered from mood disorders – primarily depression – or may have been afflicted in the past, according to a new study reported by a research team from UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas in the August issue of the *Annals of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology*.

Dr. Vicki A. Nejtek, lead author and instructor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern, said the percentage of mood disorders in the Parkland Health & Hospital System Asthma and Allergy Clinics population was much higher than statistics previously reported on asthma sufferers treated in general medical settings. Previous studies showed that up to 21 percent of asthma patients had histories of, or were fighting, depression or related disorders.

Dr. David A. Khan, assistant professor of internal medicine who participated in the study, said previous studies suggest that depression may affect the rate of asthma, as well as mortality, in low-income, minority, inner-city asthma patients.

“These mood disorders were often unrecognized and untreated in this study population, perhaps because the patients studied may be at higher risk for depression and life stresses than other cultural groups,” Khan said.

Also, depressed patients are known to be less likely to comply with their asthma treatment plan, the authors reported

Fellow researcher Dr. Sherwood Brown, assistant professor of psychiatry, said, “less than half had ever received medication for their mental illness or had a psychiatric evaluation before, even though most were already being treated for their asthma.”

Results of the study showed that the patients with current mood disorders, which

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included several types of depressive illness, had somewhat worse asthma symptoms in contrast to those who had suffered mood disorders in the past.

Investigators said a surprising finding in their study of the 44 Parkland clinic patients was that depression, the disease affecting all but two in the study, and bipolar disorder, formerly called manic-depressive illness, did not necessarily correlate with the most severe asthma cases.

Nejtek believes that, even though preliminary, the study is important because little is known about the relationship between mood, or affective disorders, and asthma. The UT Southwestern researchers are already beginning further investigation with its community patient base.

“Depression is frequently untreated in minority asthma patients, and it is important that physicians make referrals for psychiatric treatment. Doctors should also be made aware that asthma is more difficult to diagnose and treat in depressed patients,” Khan said.

Nejtek added, “Depressive symptoms can be effectively treated in most people, thus lessening adverse outcomes for depressed asthma patients.”

The research was funded in part by the Theodore and Vada Stanley Foundation, the National Alliance for Research on Schizophrenia and Depression, the Sarah M. and Charles E. Seay Center for Basic and Applied Research in Psychiatric Illness and the John Schermerhorn Psychiatric Fund.

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