

Scientists Find Clues Into Cognitive Dysfunction in Chronic Fatigue Syndrome

Immune Markers in Cerebrospinal Fluid Provide Insights Into the Basis for Symptoms Like “Brain Fog”

NEW YORK (March 31, 2015)—Scientists at Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health have identified a unique pattern of immune molecules in the cerebrospinal fluid of people with myalgic encephalomyelitis/chronic fatigue syndrome (ME/CFS) that provides insights into the basis for cognitive dysfunction—frequently described by patients as “brain fog”—as well as new hope for improvements in diagnosis and treatment.

In the study published in *Molecular Psychiatry*, Mady Hornig, MD, and colleagues used immunoassay testing methods to measure levels of 51 immune biomarkers called cytokines in the cerebrospinal fluid of 32 people with ME/CFS for an average of seven years, 40 with multiple sclerosis, and 19 non-diseased controls. The researchers found that levels of most cytokines, including the inflammatory immune molecule interleukin 1, were depressed in individuals with ME/CFS compared with the other two groups, matching what was seen in a blood study in patients who had the disease for more than three years. One cytokine—eotaxin—was elevated in the ME/CFS and MS groups, but not in the control group.

“We now know that the same changes to the immune system that we recently reported in the blood of people with ME/CFS with long-standing disease are also present in the central nervous system,” says Dr. Hornig, professor of Epidemiology and director of translational research at the Center for Infection and Immunity at the Mailman School. “These immune differences may contribute to symptoms in both the peripheral parts of the body and the brain, from muscle weakness to brain fog.”

Implications for Diagnosis and Treatment

“Diagnosis of ME/CFS is now based on clinical criteria. Our findings offer the hope of objective diagnostic tests for disease as well as the potential for therapies that correct the imbalance in cytokine levels seen in people with ME/CFS at different stages of their disease,” adds W. Ian Lipkin, MD, John Snow Professor of Epidemiology and director of the Center for Infection and Immunity.

There is precedent for use of human monoclonal antibodies that regulate the immune response in a wide range of disorders from rheumatoid arthritis to multiple sclerosis. However, the researchers note, additional work will be needed to assess the safety and efficacy of this approach.

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About Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health

Founded in 1922, Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health pursues an agenda of research, education, and service to address the critical and complex public health issues affecting New Yorkers, the nation and the world. The Mailman School is the third largest recipient of NIH grants among schools

of public health. Its over 450 multi-disciplinary faculty members work in more than 100 countries around the world, addressing such issues as preventing infectious and chronic diseases, environmental health, maternal and child health, health policy, climate change & health, and public health preparedness. It is a leader in public health education with over 1,300 graduate students from more than 40 nations pursuing a variety of master's and doctoral degree programs. The Mailman School is also home to numerous world-renowned research centers including ICAP (formerly the International Center for AIDS Care and Treatment Programs) and the Center for Infection and Immunity. For more information, please visit www.mailman.columbia.edu.