

Natural compound may help compulsive hair-pulling disorder

Imagine being unable to resist an impulse to pull your hair out and there is no good medical therapy to help you fight the urge. That is what it feels like to have trichotillomania. Trichotillomania is relatively uncommon in the general population (about 1 percent). It happens more often in children and in girls more than boys. It is also more common in those with impulse control disorders like obsessive compulsive disorder (think TV's "Monk"). Unfortunately, medications do not really help and some actually make it worse.



Patrick B. Massey, M.D.
Alternative approach

reduced the symptoms of trichotillomania.

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mania may be found in a compound made by the body, N-acetyl cysteine. A recent clinical trial demonstrated that regular consumption of N-acetyl cysteine significantly

reduced the symptoms of trichotillomania. N-acetyl cysteine is a derivative of the amino acid, cysteine. It is important in a number of critical biochemical pathways

in the body especially detoxification. In the brain, however, N-acetyl cysteine plays an important role in maintaining glutamate levels inside and outside of the nerve cells. Glutamate is an amino acid that seems to modulate compulsive behavior. N-acetyl cysteine has been shown to be beneficial in some compulsive behaviors like the impulse to use cocaine and even gambling addiction. It was hypothesized that it might be effective for reducing the hair-pulling compulsion that characterizes trichotillomania.

The effect of N-acetyl cysteine on trichotillomania

was revealed in a recent clinical trial published in the medical journal, Archives of General Psychiatry (2009). In this study, 50 participants were given either N-acetyl cysteine (1200 mg. to 2400 mg. per day) or a placebo. At the end of the 12-week study, 56 percent of patients taking N-acetyl cysteine had significant improvements in symptoms compared to only 16 percent of patients taking a placebo. Significant improvements were seen after only nine weeks of N-acetyl cysteine. In addition, it seemed that N-acetyl cysteine, at the doses used, did not have any significant

side effects.

Compulsive disorders are frustrating and potentially embarrassing. Traditional medications can be effective, but the side effects can be considerable. In addition, there is little research in this area for new and effective medications. Therefore, evaluating the benefits of a dietary supplement like N-acetyl cysteine is timely and relevant.

It has been theorized that many psychiatric disorders are the result of imbalances in brain neurotransmitters. This may be true since many psychiatric medications affect neurotransmitter levels in the

brain. This recent medical study (and others) have suggested that brain neurotransmitter levels can also be regulated by a compound as simple as N-acetyl cysteine. This is important because N-acetyl cysteine is less expensive and has fewer side effects than trichotillomania medications. It seems that the more we research, the more we find effective, natural solutions to medical conditions.

• Patrick B. Massey, M.D., Ph.D is medical director for complementary and alternative medicine for the Alexian Brothers Hospital Network.

Fibroid: Removal gets easier

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Dr. William Parker, a UCLA professor and author of "A Gynecologist's Second Opinion," has written that laparoscopic surgery has "revolutionized" gynecologic surgery by speeding up recovery time and shortening hospital stays.

Because laparoscopic myomectomy is a technically difficult procedure, Parker recommends asking surgeons how they were trained in it, how many such operations they've performed with a situation like your own and what complications they ran into.

"I think we're doing too many unnecessary hysterectomies," Song said, "because not enough doctors can do other procedures."

There are no randomized studies to be sure which treatments have the best long-range outcomes, but fibroid removal is gaining in popularity.

Dr. Howard Sharp at the University of Utah says more doctors are becoming proficient at stitching up the uterus

after such procedures, and the advance of robotic surgery is helping to make that easier.

Dr. Charles Miller, in Arlington Heights and Naperville, is one of the leading practitioners, he added.

"I still don't think every doctor is going to do it," he said, "but there may be a time when laparoscopic myomectomy is more mainstream."

At Central DuPage Hospital in Winfield, Dr. Victor Trinkus performs hysterectomies, and works with other doctors to provide alternative treatments.

One alternative is embolization, in which an interventional radiologist inserts a catheter to plug up blood vessels feeding the fibroids, causing them to shrink.

Trinkus hopes to reach women who avoid treatment altogether because they're afraid hysterectomy is the only option.

"Patients need to hear there are other options," he said. If symptoms are manageable, he added, surgery may not be necessary at all.

Childhood cancer survivors face recurrence

By NICOLE OSTROW
Bloomberg News

People who survived childhood brain cancer were 13 times more likely to die within 30 years than others their age, a study found.

The most common cause of death was recurrence of their brain cancer, according to research in the July 1 issue of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute. Others developed new malignancies, and more than 80 percent developed chronic medical conditions including hearing loss, endocrine problems, impaired vision or difficulty with emotions.

Tumors of the central nervous system, which are mostly found in the brain, are the second most common type of childhood cancer after leukemia, said the lead author of the study, Gregory Armstrong of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis, Tenn. While medical treatment enables 74 percent of the children to survive at least five years, doctors have been concerned about the impact of their diagnosis and

treatment on long-term health.

Most previous studies of long-term health in survivors of childhood brain cancer have been much smaller and followed them for 10 years or less.

The researchers included 2,821 people in the study who were diagnosed and treated from 1970 to 1986 and had already survived five or more years after their cancer was

found. The median age of the children at diagnosis was 7.5 years for those who completed a baseline questionnaire, and five-year survivors were followed over 30 years.



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