Study: Experimental Drug May Ease Schizophrenia Symptoms

: The med addresses the difficulty feeling pleasure and other emotions that characterize this mental disorder.

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Schizophrenia negatively affects the way people think, manage emotions and make decisions. Although there is no cure for schizophrenia, there are ways to manage and treat it. Now, new findings published in The New England Journal of Medicine suggest that an experimental drug may relieve a wide range of symptoms associated with the severe mental illness, reports HealthDay.

Scientists tested the drug SEP-363856 on 245 schizophrenia patients ages 18 to 40 who were all in the earlier course of the disease. Researchers randomly assigned almost half of these individuals to take SEP-363856 tablets once daily for four weeks, while the remaining participants received placebo pills.

By week four, about 65% of those who took the drug started responding positively to the treatment, compared with the 44% given a placebo. Afterward, everyone was allowed to enter a six-month study where the drug was offered to all. Results showed that the medication's overall effectiveness was maintained.

In addition, scientists found that SEP-363856 eased both the negative and positive symptoms of schizophrenia. Negative symptoms include flattened emotions, difficulty feeling pleasure and social withdrawal. Positive symptoms are hallucinations, delusions and confused thoughts. (In the case of schizophrenia, negative refers to symptoms that take away and positive refers to those that add.)

Experts note that most antipsychotic medications for schizophrenia resolve the positive symptoms but not the negative ones.

Current antipsychotic drugs block the D2 receptor on brain cells. This receptor interacts with the chemical dopamine, which helps to lessen symptoms. But research shows that this action is also responsible for the drugs' most problematic side effects.

By contrast, SEP-363856 doesn't block D2. The med stimulates the brain receptor TAAR1, known for modulating dopamine transmission.

Kenneth Koblan, PhD, the chief scientific officer at Sunovion Pharmaceuticals, which is developing the drug, and the study's author, noted that there is still a critical "unmet medical need" for an effective antipsychotic med to treat schizophrenia.

"What's striking to me is the efficacy [of SEP-363856] against negative symptoms," Koblan said.

Scientists plan to test the drug in a larger trial in the hope that one day the med will be able to help people who are failing to respond to the antipsychotics currently in use.

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