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Gabapentin Calms Some Neurologically Impaired Children

By David Douglas

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) Feb 22 - In certain children with severe neurologic impairment who exhibit chronic unexplained irritability, gabapentin therapy may lead to "marked improvement," researchers report in the February issue of Pediatrics.

"Irritability may represent abnormal signaling of the central or peripheral nervous system," lead investigator Dr. Julie M. Hauer told Reuters Health. The study "presents visceral hyperalgesia as a plausible source of chronic irritability in neurologically impaired children."

Dr. Hauer, who is currently at Children's Hospital Boston, and colleagues note that neurologically impaired children have an increased frequency of recurrent pain and irritability that persists in some despite thorough assessment and management of possible pain sources. Moreover, parents commonly identify the gastrointestinal tract as a source of pain in these children.

The researchers conducted a chart review of nine children who had been empirically treated with gabapentin for recurrent disruptive irritability. All were nonverbal and nonambulatory with severe global neurologic impairment, and they experienced recurrent and often daily crying episodes that lasted at least one hour.

After initiation of gabapentin therapy, patients remained symptom free for periods ranging from 3 months to 3 years. In one child, parents requested a halt, despite excellent symptom control, because of nystagmus. Symptoms returned within one week.

In another child, who had been successfully treated for 2 years, discontinuation of gabapentin led to a recurrence of symptoms. The symptoms resolved when therapy was restarted.

For such children, Dr. Hauer concluded, the findings "suggest a trial of gabapentin when there is no identifiable source of pain despite comprehensive evaluation and management."

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