HIV Treatment May Slow Brain Aging

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Antiretroviral (ARV) treatment of HIV may combat and even halt the harmful effects the virus appears to have on brain aging and cognitive function.

Researchers recruited 134 HIV-positive participants on successful ARV treatment with an average age of 57 as well as a control group of 79 HIV-negative individuals with similar demographic and behavioral characteristics. (A respective 120 and 76 of them completed the study's follow-up.)

The researchers found that HIV is indeed associated with brain injury. At the study's outset, compared with the HIV-negative participants, those living with the virus had smaller so-called gray matter and abnormal white matter microstructure in the brain and worse cognitive performance.

The good news is that after following the participants for about two years, the scientists did not see any excess decline in key measures of brain injury or cognitive function among the HIV-positive participants compared with the control group. Participants in both groups experienced a bit less than a 1 percent annual decline in brain volume.

"In our opinion, these findings are reassuring and do not provide any evidence for accelerated aging" of the brain related to well-treated HIV, said study coauthor Rosan van Zoest, MD, a PhD student at the Amsterdam Institute for Global Health and Development. "Some people might argue that two years is a rather short time. On the other hand, declines in brain structure and function are commonly observed over a one-year period—or less, in fact—in neurological studies with a similar age group."

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