Are symptoms of OCD linked to movement disorders?

Some people with certain rare illnesses that affect their ability to control their movements, also show symptoms of obsessive compulsive disorder. Researchers think this may be because both movement disorders and obsessive compulsive disorders are caused by changes in the brain. But we need more research to better understand the relationship between these two types of illnesses.

What do we know already?

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD for short) is a long-term (chronic) mental illness that causes people to have obsessive thoughts and compulsive behaviour. It affects between 2 and 3 people in every 100 over the course of their lifetime.

In OCD, an obsession is an unwanted, unpleasant thought, image or urge that recurs in a person’s mind and causes them extreme distress and anxiety. A compulsion is a repetitive behaviour or act that a person feels compelled to do to try to avoid the negative effect of the obsession. For example, a person with OCD who has an obsession about cleanliness will feel compelled to wash their hands after touching objects they think are dirty, and will become extremely anxious if they are not able to. If OCD is severe this can prevent people from getting on with normal daily activities.

Doctors think that OCD could be caused by changes in certain parts of the brain. We know that people who have OCD are also more likely to have other illnesses that are caused by similar changes in the brain, such as tic disorders or Tourette’s syndrome. These illnesses involve movements, words or sounds that a person makes without being able to control them.

But we don’t know if people who have OCD are more likely to have other movement illnesses, similar to tics and Tourette’s syndrome. These types of illnesses are called non-tic hyperkinetic movement disorders.

So researchers reviewed 29 studies that looked at people with these disorders, recording how many people also had symptoms of OCD. The studies included 7,349 people in total.
What does the new study say?
The researchers said the link between OCD and two types of non-tic movement disorder – Huntington’s disease and Sydenham’s chorea – was the strongest.
Both Huntington’s disease and Sydenham’s chorea are illnesses that cause uncontrolled movements (called chorea), and in the case of Huntington’s disease, it can slowly progresses and becomes worse over time.
One small study found that 1 in every 20 people with Huntington’s disease had obsessive thoughts and 1 in every 10 showed compulsive behaviour.
Also, in the pooled results of three studies with nearly 2,000 people, 52 in every 100 people with Huntington’s disease had symptoms of OCD, compared with 27 in 100 people who carried the Huntington’s gene without having the illness, and 24 in 100 people in the general population.
Five studies found an increase in OCD symptoms in people with Sydenham’s chorea compared to people who did not have Sydenham’s chorea.
But studies generally did not find a strong link between OCD and other movement disorders.

How reliable are the findings?
Reviews like this that compare and pool the results of several studies can be a good way of looking at all the available evidence on a subject. But there are a few problems that may affect the reliability of these findings.
Many of the studies were quite small (less than 100 people) and this can make the results less reliable. In more than half of the studies people had not been diagnosed with OCD by a doctor, and many studies used different tools and questionnaires to describe and measure people’s symptoms of OCD.
This meant that it was difficult to compare the studies directly, and this may have affected the reliability of the results.

What does this mean for me?
This study shows there may be a link between OCD and some non-tic movement disorders, specifically Huntington’s disease and Sydenham’s chorea. These findings may help researchers better understand these illnesses and their causes, which could lead to better treatments. However, it’s important to note that Huntington’s disease and Sydenham’s chorea are not very common. And although people with these illnesses are more likely to also have OCD, most people with OCD do not have these conditions.
http://jnnp.bmj.com/content/83/6/646.full

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