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Scientists discover gene for obesity in lab mice

NEW YORK (AP) — After a 40-year search, scientists have found a gene for obesity in mice and a likely counterpart in humans — discoveries that could someday help people control their weight.

It is the first gene ever isolated that clearly participates in the normal process of regulating weight, scientists said.

In its normal form, the mouse gene appears to let fat

cells tell the brain how obese the animal is, so that the mouse will adjust its feeding and activity to keep its weight steady.

That system goes awry when the gene is flawed. Mice lacking a normal version of the gene get so fat they weigh three times more than their siblings, said researcher Dr. Jeffrey Friedman.

He and colleagues also found

a human gene that strongly resembles the mouse obesity gene, and it may play a similar role in people, Friedman said.

If so, the finding could open the door to a better understanding of how people control their weight, which in turn may lead to new treatments for obesity, he said.

He and others will look to see if mutations in the human gene are associated with obesity.

While mutations in mouse gene produce extreme fatness, more subtle flaws in the human gene may contribute to more common degrees of obesity in people, he said.

Friedman, an associate investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute at Rockefeller University in New York, and colleagues reported their discoveries in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature.

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