

Ewe Hall

By JED

Scientists link schizophrenia gene, nicotine

WASHINGTON (AP) — Scientists have located a gene that may increase the risk of inheriting schizophrenia — a finding that could also explain why many schizophrenics chain smoke.

Essentially, nicotine appears to override briefly a brain defect characteristic of the devastating mental illness, providing frenzied patients a few minutes of calm, researchers report in Tuesday's edition of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.

"Schizophrenics are the most heavy smokers of any psychotic patients," Dr. Robert Freedman of the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center said. "They had discovered this (effect) before we had, and it had been overlooked as a clue to the biology of schizophrenia."

At issue is the inability of many schizophrenics to filter out unnecessary sights, sounds and other stimuli — that tapping tree branch or the refrigerator hum that healthy people can ignore — so they essentially suffer information overload.

Freedman and colleagues at the University of Colorado discovered that this trait is inherited. They linked a gene that appears responsible for that to a brain receptor which helps filter information, a receptor that can be stimulated by nicotine.

Schizophrenics who smoke get enough nicotine to switch on this receptor for brief relief, Freedman said.

"All the patients report they feel great after a cigarette," he said. Gershon said while Freedman has strong evidence linking this schizophrenia trait to the nicotine receptor gene, he does not yet have proof. Freedman has not found the gene mutation that would cause it.

It is an important step forward that points to a potential new target for drug therapy, Gershon said.

"We certainly don't recommend people take up smoking to try to combat their schizophrenia because the effect literally lasts just a few minutes" and smoking causes killer diseases like lung cancer, he said.

The findings are "reassuring to family members who wonder why their (schizophrenic) children can't stop smoking," he said.



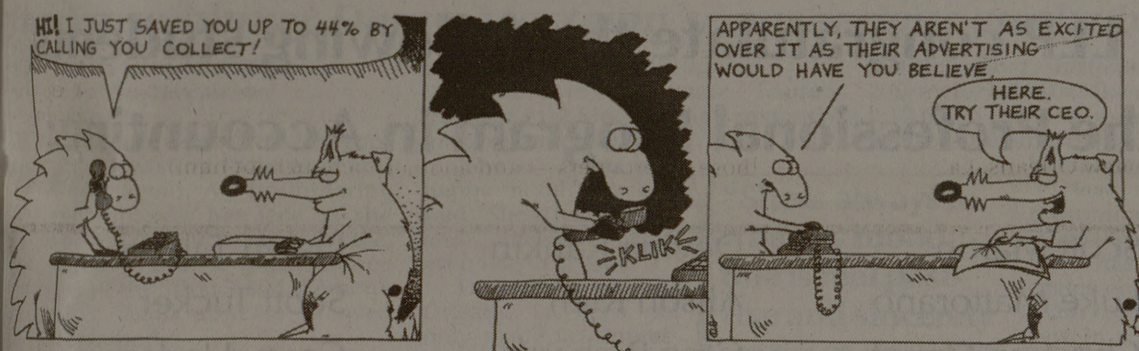
Peeps

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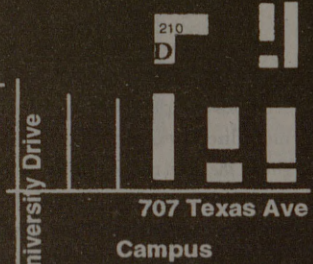
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