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AIDS enigma in women

SCIENTISTS in the United States believe they can help explain why women infected with the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) advance faster to AIDS than men.

One of the enigmas about the AIDS pandemic is why women, after infection with HIV-1, seem better able to combat the virus in its early stages but advance faster to AIDS later compared to men infected with a similar level of the virus.

The answer lies in the response of a key component in their immune system, and hormonal differences may account for it, according to a paper published online by the journal *Nature Medicine*.

If right, it throws up new possibilities for drugs that would hinder the process according to the paper. The study focuses on plasmacytoid dendritic cells (pDCs), which are "first responders" in the immune system. They detect a microbial intruder and alert other defenders.

The pDCs recognise the AIDS virus through a little docking point called Toll-like receptor 7, or TLR7. Once the TLR7 is switched on, the pDCs call up an important immune-system molecule called interferon alpha.

Researchers at the Ragon Institute of the Massachusetts General Hospital were intrigued by lab-dish tests that showed higher levels of the female hormone progesterone intensified pDC activation.

The team then linked interferon alpha to the activation of one of the heavy artillery of the immune system — CD8 cells. The more CD8 cells that are stimulated, the faster a patient progresses to

acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), the stage whereby the immune system is so devastated that the body becomes prey to opportunistic disease. — AFP

Walking or biking to work can increase your fitness

WALKING or biking to work, even part way, is linked with fitness. Active commuters did better on treadmill tests of fitness, even when researchers accounted for their leisure-time physical activity levels, suggesting commuter choices do make a difference.

This finding was a result of a US study on health and commuting on more than 2,000 middle-aged city dwellers. The men in the study (but not women) who were active commuters also had healthier numbers for body mass index, blood pressure, insulin and blood fats called triglycerides.

The authors of the report speculate that this was because women walked or biked shorter distances and they may have done so less vigorously.

The report said only 17 per cent of workers walked or bicycled any portion of their commute.

Crumbling sidewalks, lack of bike paths and sheer distances were cited as obstacles which kept commuters in their cars. — AP

Lack of sleep could lead to postpartum depression

POOR sleep after childbirth appears to increase the risk of postpartum depression, according to findings published in the journal *Sleep*.

"Postpartum women sleep

less during the early weeks following delivery than other periods of reproductive age," said Dr Signe Karen Dorheim, of Norway Stavanger University Hospital.

"These women have an increased risk of depression," she added. Dr Dorheim's group studied 2,830 women who delivered at Stavanger University Hospital between October 2005 and September 2006. The women reported

that they slept an average of 6.5 hours per night.

After adjusting the data for other significant depression risk factors — including previous sleep problems, being a first-time mother, not exclusively breast-feeding, having a young infant or having a male infant, and stressful life events — poor sleep was still associated with depression.

"Tiredness after delivery may be attributed to lack of sleep, but the reduced daytime energy could also be caused by depression," said Dorheim.

"Women with postpartum depression may also benefit from treatment of sleep problems," she added.—

Reuters



Walking to work is heart-healthy.