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First-episode major depression in adolescents

Affective, cognitive and endocrine characteristics of risk status and predictors of onset

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Background

There is little information on whether patterns of steroids precede and are associated with depressive onset.

Aims

To establish whether there is an association between salivary cortisol and/ or dihydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) levels and depression independent of psychosocial risk.

Method

Two subgroups of adolescents in the community at high (n = 181) and low (n = 65) risk for psychopathology were interviewed for recent psychiatric disorder at entry and again at 12 months. Salivary samples (08.00 and 20.00h) for hormone estimations and self-reports on current mood and cognitive style were obtained at both assessments.

Results

Neither hormone was associated with risk status, current mood or cognitive style at entry. Of 31 onsets of major depression that occurred over the next 12 months, 30 came from the high-risk group but were not associated with any particular pattern of risk. Increased negative mood and feelings and DHEA (08.00h) hypersecretion at entry were associated with subsequent major depression.

Conclusions

Both negative mood and feelings and alterations in adrenal steroid function precede the onset of first episode major depression in adolescents. Variation in levels of hormones may arise from more distal origins and recent life events and current ongoing difficulties.

Declaration of interest

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