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Recent life events, cortisol, dihydroepiandrosterone and the onset of major depression in high-risk adolescents

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Background

It is not clear whether cortisol or dihydroepiandrosterone (DHEA) increases the risk for major depression in the presence of undesirable life events.

Aims

To determine whether there is a specific pattern of psychoendocrine factors that predicts the onset of major depressive disorder.

Method

180 adolescents (73 boys, 107 girls) at high risk for psychopathology were assessed for cortisol, DHEA, depressive symptoms, life events and psychiatric disorder at entry and 12 months later.

Results

Major depression was predicted for both genders by the additive effects of: higher depressive symptoms; personal disappointments and losses only in the month before onset; one or more daily levels of cortisol at 08.00 h or DHEA at 20.00 h greater than the 80th percentile of the daily mean.

Conclusions

A subgroup of adolescents may carry a physiological risk for major depression which may be either of genetic and/or earlier psychosocial origin.

Declaration of interest

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