Reply to Mendy

TO THE EDITOR—We thank Mendy for highlighting the importance of appropriate control of covariates including visual impairment, child’s education level and stroke, when examining the association between herpesviruses and cognitive impairment [1]. As noted, herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) enters latency in the trigeminal ganglion but can travel along facial nerves to the eye and cause ocular diseases such as conjunctivitis and herpes keratitis, severe cases of which may lead to scarring of the cornea and subsequent vision impairment, including blindness [2]. Similarly, cytomegalovirus (CMV) can infect the eye, causing CMV retinitis, which, although primarily observed in immunocompromised populations, can also lead to blindness [3]. Mendy, therefore, draws attention to one biological mechanism by which herpesviruses may lead to poorer performance on visually based cognitive tasks [1]. The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) III asked all participants whether they had “trouble seeing with one or both eyes, even when wearing glasses or contact lenses,” and asked adults whether they had “total blindness in one or both eyes.” Among those tested for HSV-1 and cognition, the weighted proportion reporting visual impairment among children and middle-aged adults was 13.3% and 10.8%, respectively, and the weighted proportion reporting blindness among middle-aged adults was <1.0%.

HSV-1 but not CMV seropositivity was significantly associated with visual impairment among children in our sample (odds ratio, 1.69 [95% confidence interval (CI), 1.03–2.76]), after controlling for age, sex, race/ethnicity, poverty income ratio (PIR), family education level, country of origin, and smoking exposure. While there was no association between visual impairment and reading score, visual impairment remained significantly associated with block design score (β, −0.62 [95% CI, −1.22 to −.02]), after adjusting for age, sex, race/ethnicity, PIR, family education level, country of origin, smoking exposure, and HSV-1 seropositivity. After additional adjustment for visual impairment, the associations between HSV-1 seropositivity and reading and block design scores were only slightly attenuated (ie, β, −0.67 [95% CI, −1.17 to −.16] and −0.78 [95% CI, −1.25 to −.31], respectively) and remained statistically significant. Among middle-aged adults, CMV and HSV-1 seropositivity were not significantly associated with visual impairment, nor was visual impairment significantly associated with serial digit substitution test (SDST) impairment in fully adjusted models. In addition, there was no association between HSV-1 or CMV seropositivity and blindness, nor was blindness associated with SDST impairment among middle-aged adults. Moreover, there was no substantial attenuation of the association between HSV-1 or...
CMV seropositivity and SDST impairment after additionally controlling for visual impairment or blindness. Our findings suggest, therefore, that herpesviruses likely negatively impact reading, spatial reasoning, and coding speed via mechanisms beyond infection-related visual impairment. Importantly, even if the impact of herpesviruses on cognitive test performance was mediated solely by visual impairment, herpesvirus infections could still result in the same adverse consequences across the lifespan, such as poorer grades, lower educational attainment, and decreased social mobility.

Mendy also suggested that, beyond controlling for education level of head of household and PIR, we should control for child’s education level in our analyses [1]. However, since children in our sample had not completed their education, age is directly correlated with grade level; thus, additionally controlling for child’s education level would introduce substantial collinearity into our models. In auxiliary analyses, we did not observe a statistically significant association between HSV-1 or CMV seropositivity and repeating a grade because of academic failure in fully adjusted models among children in our sample. Most importantly, if herpesviruses are causally related to impaired cognition in childhood, lower educational attainment for age would be considered a potentially important consequence of infection-related cognitive deficits and not a confounder of the association between herpesviruses, beginning in childhood, and a wide range of cognitive measures (both visually and not visually based) across the lifespan and that elucidate the biological pathways by which herpesviruses impact different domains of cognition are warranted.

Notes

Financial support. This work was supported by the National Institute on Aging, National Institutes of Health (grant 1-R01-AG-040115 to A. E. A and J. B. D.), and the Stanley Medical Research Institute (to A. E. A.).

Potential conflicts of interest. All authors: No reported conflicts.

All authors have submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest. Conflicts that the editors consider relevant to the content of the manuscript have been disclosed.

Amanda M. Simanek,1 Kara D. Tarter,2 Jennifer B. Dowd,3 and Allison E. Aiello4

1. Joseph Z. Zilber School of Public Health, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, WI; 2Department of Epidemiology, Center for Social Epidemiology and Population Health, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor, MI; 3CUNY School of Public Health, Hunter College, City University of New York, New York; and 4Department of Epidemiology, Gillings School of Global Public Health, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

References


Received 30 January 2014; accepted 31 January 2014; electronically published 6 February 2014.

Correspondence: Amanda M. Simanek, MPH, PhD, Assistant Professor of Epidemiology, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, Joseph J. Zilber School of Public Health, PO Box 413, Milwaukee, WI 53201-0413 (simaneka@uwm.edu).

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DOI: 10.1093/infdis/jiu082.