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NEWS LOCAL

Protein helps deadly melanoma spread, researchers think

JONATHAN SHER, The London Free Press
Wednesday, August 15, 2012 11:05:50 EDT PM

It's good protein gone bad, a suspect in disease and disorders. And now London researchers think it may take part of the rap for the spread of the deadliest form of skin cancer.

Called pannexin or Panx1, it plays a crucial role in normal cells, serving as doorways that, when open, allows certain things to pass through.

But in cells affected by melanoma, pannexin increases the number of doorways to the cell five-fold, something researchers at Western University think contributes to the spread of the disease beyond the skin.

When researchers curbed pannexin in cancerous cultures from mice, they found cells behaved more like normal cells, a promising finding published in the Aug. 17 issue of the Journal of Biological Chemistry.

"We now want to correlate our discovery to patient samples using the human melanoma bank through our collaboration with Dr. Muriel Brackstone and other clinicians at the London Health Sciences Centre, to see if this is a cancer marker," says Silvia Penuela, a post-doctoral fellow who led a team working in the lab of Dale Laird, a professor of anatomy and cell biology, and Canada Research Chair in Gap Junctions and Disease.

By learning how much Panx1 a patient has, a doctor may gain insight into how aggressive the melanoma may be, knowledge that could affect treatment, the researchers say.

The Laird laboratory recently received a \$200,000 Innovation grant from the Canadian Cancer Society Research Institute to further its studies of the protein -- the next step is to use biopsied cultures taken from patients at different stages of melanoma.

"It's nice to get some funding," Laird said Wednesday.

Malignant melanoma only accounts for four per cent of all skin cancers and yet, it's responsible for 79% of skin cancer-related deaths.

It's not the first time Panx1 has been fingered for possibly playing a role in disease and disorders. Researchers at the University of Calgary have found it may be linked to Crohn's disease and ulcerative colitis. Others are investigating links it has to the progression of HIV.

About melanoma

- The least common, but most deadly form of skin cancer
- 90% of cases caused by exposure to ultraviolet radiation from sunlight, including radiation from tanning beds.
- Survival rate high if detected early; visible on the skin
- Affects nearly 6,000 Canadians a year, with nearly 1,000 deaths.

- Lifetime risk for melanoma has increased 20-fold since the 1930s.

**Source: Melanoma Network of Canada*

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