Morphine Might Cut Traumatic Stress Symptoms

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Morphine treatment immediately after a traumatic injury might reduce symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in civilian and military personnel, according to a study published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* and reported by *The New York Times.*

PTSD is a mental health disorder people can develop after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events such as war, rape, natural disasters and kidnapping.

“This is just one paper, one analysis, but it’s exciting because of the strength of the finding,” said Troy Lisa Holbrook, MD, the study’s lead author. “A lot of people have been looking for a secondary preventive to interrupt the formation of traumatic memories.”

Researchers at the Naval Health Research Center in San Diego studied the medical records of 696 previously wounded troops stationed in Iraq. Scientists chose these soldiers to determine whether and when they received morphine treatment. (Military doctors administered morphine to treat the troops’ most severe injuries within the first two hours of trauma.)

Study findings showed that docs diagnosed 243 of the 696 soldiers with PTSD within two years. After evaluating the soldiers’ medical information, researchers concluded that PTSD diagnoses were half as common among troops who received morphine as compared with those not treated with the drug

“If the findings hold up, the implications are huge and go well beyond the military,” said Glenn Saxe, MD a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School in Boston and director of the Center for Refugee Trauma and Resilience at Children’s Hospital Boston.

Saxe is not connected with the soldier study, but he and other researchers conducted similar research. They found that larger doses of morphine given to children burn patients also reduced post-traumatic stress symptoms.

“This idea that medicine can be used in the wake of a trauma to diminish the risk of developing a psychiatric disorder is incredibly important,” Saxe said.

Although he hinted that both studies’ findings may offer benefits to civilian victims of traumatic

events, Saxe and other experts warned that any help from morphine treatment should be balanced against the drug's drawbacks: It's addictive and can affect memory of important events.

Read *RH*'s, "A Look at the Walking Wounded" to learn more about post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

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