

Autoimmune Encephalitis: When Psychosis Is a Neurological Emergency

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Abstract

Autoimmune encephalitis demonstrates why the presenting symptom and the underlying pathology cannot always be equated. Some patients initially appear to have primary psychosis, anxiety or mood disturbance but develop seizures, movement disorders, impaired consciousness or autonomic instability. Recognition matters because the diagnosis, investigations and treatments differ from those of primary psychiatric illness. The existence of this condition does not justify assuming autoimmunity in every first-episode psychosis.

From antibodies to circuitry

In anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, pathogenic immunoglobulins interact with neuronal NMDA receptors and disrupt receptor-mediated synaptic function. Early features may include behavioral disorganization, hallucinations, insomnia or agitation; evolving neurological manifestations may include seizures, dyskinesias, catatonia, autonomic disturbance and decreased consciousness. Other antibody-mediated encephalitides have different clinical signatures, demographics and associated conditions. Autoimmune encephalitis is therefore not one disease with one blood test.

Why routine psychiatric categories can mislead

Diagnostic classification helps describe symptoms, but a first episode unfolding over days with profound sleep disruption and rapid neurological change deserves a broader approach. EEG, CSF studies, MRI, antibody testing and assessment for alternative causes may be appropriate according to the clinical picture. MRI can be unrevealing in some encephalitis cases, and serum antibody results alone may be misleading; interpretation belongs in a neurological and clinical context. The goal is neither indiscriminate panels nor reflex attribution to psychiatric illness.

The postpartum example

In a study involving 96 women with postpartum psychosis, Bergink and colleagues found two patients with anti-NMDA receptor antibodies, alongside other neuronal antibody findings. This identifies a rare but important differential; it does not establish that all postpartum psychosis is autoimmune. The ordinary clinical emergency of postpartum psychosis remains urgent regardless of antibody status. Likewise, patients with primary bipolar disorder may become very unwell without having encephalitis.

Treatment and safety

Immune-directed treatment for confirmed or strongly suspected encephalitis is a specialty decision, often involving intensive neurological assessment. Psychiatric symptom management, seizure control and supportive care may also be necessary. High-potency dopamine blockade may create particular challenges in some encephalitic syndromes, but drug selection must be individualized. The appropriate lesson is coordinated care, not substitution of a single unproven immune intervention for established emergency treatment.

Diagnostic error in both directions

The spectacular clinical stories of autoimmune encephalitis can distort base-rate reasoning. Because a small fraction of psychosis may reflect immune disease, it does not follow that every person with first-episode psychosis needs a broad commercial antibody panel. Conversely, because most psychiatric episodes are not encephalitis, rapid neurological deterioration must not be dismissed as ordinary psychotic behavior. The correct threshold for testing depends on red flags, examination, timing and specialized interpretation.

This problem is particularly important with serum-only testing. Some antibody results may be false positive or clinically nonspecific; some conditions require cerebrospinal fluid or other contextual evidence. A negative imaging study cannot reliably exclude all forms of encephalitis. The best care occurs when psychiatry and neurology treat the patient as one person, share the evolving timeline and revise the differential as new findings appear.

Conclusion

Autoimmune encephalitis is a powerful proof that a psychiatric presentation can conceal a neurological process. The duty is to recognize the pattern that merits investigation while resisting the equally dangerous temptation to call every unexplained psychiatric symptom autoimmune.

Selected readings

- Dalmau et al., Anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis case series
- Pollak et al., Autoimmune psychosis consensus
- Bergink et al., Postpartum psychosis autoantibodies