

Is Perfect Pitch Genetic?

Study suggests this form of musical know-how is not simply training-related

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TUESDAY, Oct. 23 (HealthDay News) -- Having perfect pitch may have as much to do with your genes as with early and extensive musical training, according to a new study.

People with perfect pitch can sing a specific note without first hearing a reference tone. The skill has long been associated with beginning to learn music at a young age and continuing for many years.

The study included 27 English-speaking adults, including seven with perfect pitch, who began extensive musical training at or before the age of 6. The participants' memory skills were assessed using a test that measures how many numbers a person can remember and immediately recall in the correct order.

The test was conducted visually on a computer screen and again in auditory form using headphones.

The people with perfect pitch did much better than the others on the auditory test, while both groups had similar scores on the visual test. This is important because previous research has shown that genetics affect how well people do on the auditory test.

The researchers noted that people who speak English and other non-tonal languages are less likely to develop perfect pitch than those who speak tonal languages such as Mandarin.

These findings show "that perfect pitch is associated with an unusually large memory span for speech sounds, which in turn could facilitate the development of associations between pitches and their spoken languages early in life," Diana Deutsch, professor of psychology at the University of California, San Diego, said in an American Institute of Physics news release.

The study was to be presented Tuesday at the Acoustical Society of America meeting in Kansas City, Mo. Data and conclusions presented at meetings should be considered preliminary until published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

SOURCE: American Institute of Physics, news release, Oct. 23, 2012

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