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GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE CORRELATIONS BETWEEN CORTISOL LEVELS OR DHEA-S/CORTISOL RATIO AND PANIC-AGORAPHOBIC DIMENSIONS IN HEALTHY SUBJECTS

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Introduction: A link between anxiety and disfunctions of the Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis has been widely reported in both normal and pathological anxiety, but research findings are controversial.

Objectives: To explore gender differences in the relationships between cortisol and neurosteroids and subthreshold anxiety dimensions.

Aims: To investigate the possible correlations between serum cortisol and dehydroepiandrosterone sulphate (DHEA-S) levels, or DHEA-S/cortisol ratio, and the subthreshold panic dimensions in a sample of healthy subjects.

Methods: Forty-two Italian civilians, without current or lifetime psychiatry disorders, were recruited and assessed by means of the Structured Clinical Interview for DSM-IV (SCID-I/P) and a specific questionnaire, the so-called Panic Agoraphobic Spectrum-Self Report lifetime version (PAS-SR), for assessing subthreshold panic-agoraphobic dimensions.

Results: The results showed the presence of significant negative correlations between the cortisol levels and the total scores of the PAS-SR and of the following domains: separation sensitivity, panic like symptoms and medication/substance sensitivity. The PAS-SR total and the panic-like symptoms domain scores were related positively to the DHEAS/cortisol ratio. When the sample was distinguished in women and men, it turned out that this correlations were present only in women.

Conclusions: This findings would indicate that cortisol levels are related to subthreshold panic-agoraphobic symptoms, with a gender specificity. Therefore, further studies are needed to investigate those subthreshold conditions in order to indentify possible gender differences that may account for phenotypes at higher risk for psychiatric disorders.