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From Friday's Globe and Mail Published on Thursday, Jul. 29, 2010 5:07PM EDT Last updated on Thursday, Jul. 29, 2010 5:29PM EDT

Safer epilepsy options

Medical experts are well aware that drugs used to treat epilepsy can sometimes trigger a very serious side effect – an increased risk of depression and suicide. But a new study provides encouraging news – only some of these medications seem to be associated with an elevated risk.

The research is based on more than 44,000 patients in Britain who were prescribed epilepsy drugs from 1989 to 2005. During that time, 453 patients harmed themselves or attempted suicide and 78 died at their own hands. By looking at which drugs the patients were taking, the researchers were able to estimate the level of suicide risk associated with the various medications.

The findings, published in the journal *Neurology*, reveal that the risk for self harm is primarily associated with some of the newer anti-epilepsy drugs which were introduced in the 1990s. Anticonvulsant medications in this high-risk category include levetiracetam, topiramate and vigabatrin.

By contrast, some of the other new medications as well as the older anti-seizure drugs were not linked to depression or suicidal behaviour. This group included: lamotrigine, gabapentin, carbamazepine, valproate and phenytoin.

“These results may be helpful for doctors and patients with epilepsy as they decide which drugs to use,” the study's lead author, Frank Andersohn of Charité University Medical Center in Berlin, said in a statement.

However, the researchers point out that the some of the drugs were taken by a relatively small number of patients, so the results must be confirmed with additional studies. Furthermore, they warn that patients should not abruptly stop or change their epilepsy medication based on this one study and should discuss the issue with their physician. The risks of not taking drugs to control seizures are significantly greater than the potential risk of suicide, they said.