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Music hits right note for stroke patients

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By Michael Kahn

LONDON (Reuters) - A little Beethoven is good for the brain, according to a Finnish study published on Wednesday showing that music helps people recover more quickly from strokes.

And patients who listened to a few hours of music each day soon after a stroke also improved their verbal memory and were in a better mood compared to patients who did not listen to music or used audio books, the researchers said.

Music therapy has long been used in a range of treatments but the study published in the journal *Brain* is the first to show the effect in people, they added.

"These findings demonstrate for the first time that music listening during the early post-stroke stage can enhance cognitive recovery and prevent negative mood," the researchers wrote.

Strokes, which occur when blood flow to the brain is blocked, can kill brain tissue and are one of the worldwide leading causes of death and permanent disability. Treatments include blood thinning drugs and attempts to lower cholesterol.

The study involved 60 people who recently had a stroke of the middle cerebral artery in the left or right side of the brain. This is the most common stroke and can affect motor control, speech and a range of other cognitive functions.

One group listened to their favorite music every day or used audio books while another did not listen to any music. All volunteers received standard rehabilitation treatment.

Three months after stroke music listeners showed a 60 percent better improvement in verbal memory compared to an 18 percent benefit for those using audio books and 29 percent for people who did not listen to either.

The ability to focus attention also improved by 17 percent in music listeners, said Teppo Sarkamo, a psychologist at the Cognitive Brain Research Unit at the University of Helsinki, who led the study.

"We can't say what is happening in the brain but based on previous research and theory it may be music listening could actually activate the brain areas that are recovering," he said in a telephone interview.

Music might also in some way activate more general mechanisms that repair and renew the brain's neural networks after stroke, Sarkamo said.

Larger studies are needed to better understand exactly what is going on but these findings show that music may offer a cheap, easy additional treatment for stroke patients, he said.

"This could be considered a pilot study," Sarkamo said. "It is a promising start."

(Reporting by Michael Kahn, Editing by Maggie Fox and Dominic Evans)

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