Do-It-Yourself Brain Stimulation is Risky

By ACSH Staff — July 7, 2016

Our bodies work on induction and our brains have electric current, so it makes sense that, properly done, transcranial direct current stimulation (tDCS) may enhance cognition and lessen symptoms of depression, anxiety and other conditions.

Yet even experts can't be sure how and if it can truly work reliably yet. For that reason, the recent fad of Do-It-Yourself tDCS devices could be doing more harm than good.

In a new editorial published in Annals of Neurology, the authors note that stimulation affects more of the brain than anyone may realize, and that could lead to altered brain functions. Stimulating one brain area may improve the ability to perform one task, but it could also hurt the ability to perform another. Finally, they note that small changes in tDCS settings can have large and unexpected effects that may be long lasting, and tDCS effects are highly variable across different people.

“Scientific papers can give the impression that tDCS has clear benefits with no side effects, motivating do-it-yourself use. However the authors of these scientific papers generally do not encourage this. With Do-It-Yourself tDCS on the rise, we thought it was time to outline why,” said Dr. Michael D. Fox, senior author of the article.

Citizen science is a wonderful thing, but self-experimentation should be used with caution, especially by people who already have mental health issues.

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