Don’t blame your Neanderthal ancestors for depression

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In a study published in *Science,* Corinne Simonti from Vanderbilt University and her colleagues simultaneously looked at Neanderthal DNA across the human genome and looked for associations with more than 1,600 traits and diseases. It was an unprecedentedly broad and systematic approach, made possible through an unlikely source of information: electronic medical records.

Capra’s team found that Neanderthal DNA affects the risk of psychiatric disorders, including mood disorders and depression (which are new and unexpected). And 29 specific Neanderthal variants seem to influence when and where genes are turned on in different parts of the brain.

Some headlines will inevitably claim that we can blame Neanderthals for depression, but that’s nonsense. For a start, the effect is subtle, explaining just 1 percent of a person’s depression risk. “We shouldn’t blame Neanderthals for any of these associations, which are complex traits with many things contributing to them,” says Capra. “And of course, depression is a very new concept of a disease. You can’t think of Neanderthals or our ancestors being depressed.”

The findings might also provide insights into parts of our lives, beyond just our health. “A lot of people will misunderstand this as saying that the Neanderthal genes typically have bad medical outcomes,” says John Hawks from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who was not involved in the study. But that’s largely because of the study’s source material: “When you’re looking at medical records, you’re only looking at the problem phenotypes. You’re not seeing anything beneficial.”

Read full, original post: The Link Between Neanderthal DNA and Depression Risk