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A UWO study says that's how you know when someone's paying attention.

Scientists eye the neck

John Miner
Sun Media

December 9, 2007

Want to know if someone is paying attention when you're talking to them?

Forget about relying on eye contact.

It's the neck muscles that can really tell the tale for scientists, according to research by the Centre for Brain and Mind at the University of Western Ontario.

"It is a totally surprising finding that you wouldn't expect," said Brian Corneil at the centre.

Using electrodes attached to deep neck muscles, the researchers found they could detect signals from the brain to the muscles when attention had covertly shifted.

The shift in attention can take place even though the eyes remain fixed on a subject.

"You could be looking at your computer screen but paying attention to a cup of coffee somewhere else. That's covert attention. It can be dissociated from where you are currently looking," said Corneil, whose work is published in the advance online publication of Nature Neuroscience.

The brain seems to be hedging its bets, keeping the eyes focused on one thing while it decides what it will do, Corneil said.

"It is like a baseball batter when they are deciding whether they are going to swing at a pitch or not. They already start movements of the arms and shoulders, but the last thing they do is decide whether to make a whole swing. It is the same principle," he said.

The discovery that the neck muscles can detect a shift in attention may be useful in medical research.

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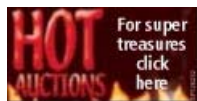
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At present, neurological research often involves MRI scans that provide a second-by-second image of what is happening in the brain.

Corneil said the signals from the neck muscles are provided in milli-seconds -- one thousandth of a second.

That could be valuable in studying degenerative brain diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's, he said.

"It could be a different tool in the tool box."

Funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and the Human Frontier Science Program, the study was conducted in collaboration with researchers at Queen's University and the University of Toronto.

John Miner is a Free Press health reporter.

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Health News

Stress disorders hit single soldiers hardest (Dec. 14, 2007)

Young and single soldiers have the highest rates of depression and post-traumatic stress disorders, a national survey led by a London psychiatrist has found.

Medical isotope crisis getting better locally (Dec. 14, 2007)

London hospitals expect to be fully back on track by the end of January with the cancer and heart scans that were derailed by the shutdown of the Chalk River nuclear reactor.

Shriners give \$1M to hospital (Dec. 13, 2007)

Mocha Shriners voted Dec. 12 to contribute \$1 million to establish a telemedicine service at Children's Hospital.

Sickest patients get isotopes priority (Dec. 12, 2007)

Prime Minister Stephen Harper's government introduced emergency legislation yesterday aimed at bypassing Canada's nuclear safety watchdog and putting a swift end to a critical shortage of medical isotopes.



Medical isotope crisis getting

better locally London hospitals expect to be fully back on track by the end of January with the cancer and heart scans that were derailed by the shutdown of the Chalk River nuclear reactor. **Full Story**

Motherload

MOTHERLOAD: More help available for at-risk infants (Dec. 3, 2007)

Baby Jordan Heikamp died of starvation a decade ago while living in a Toronto shelter with his mom.

Why is baby still crying? (Nov. 19, 2007)

Laurel Fischtein-Sussman thought she was a terrible mom.

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