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Human stem cells help paralysed rats to walk

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SCIENTISTS have used cells from the embryos of human beings to restore mobility to rats with spinal cord injuries. The experiments show the technique's promise for treating paralysed patients.

Research in the United States has shown that a therapy derived from human embryonic stem (ES) cells helps damaged spinal nerves to regrow in rats, to the extent that the animals recover the ability to walk.

The findings, from a team at the University of California at Irvine (UCI), offer proof of the principle that human ES cells have the potential to repair certain kinds of spinal injury that lead to paralysis in people. While years of research will be required before similar therapies can be tested on human beings, the study has increased scientists' confidence that this approach will work in the end.

"We're excited by these results," Hans Keirstead, of the UCI Reeve-Irvine Research Centre, said. "This study suggests one approach to treating people who've just suffered spinal cord injury. There is still much work to do before we can engage in human clinical tests."

The results, which are published today in the *Journal of Neuroscience*, suggest that stem-cell treatments could eventually be used in the immediate aftermath of spinal injuries to promote recovery.

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