

Research areas for stem cells



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Some areas where researchers say stem cells of various types may one day prove of value, although all the research is in very early stages:

_California-based Geron Corp. will start the world's first study of a treatment based on human embryonic stem cells this summer, a project aimed at patients who recently suffered a spinal cord injury that left their legs paralyzed. Study participants will be given a single injection within two weeks of the injury, to see if the treatment helps repair damaged nerves.

Stem cells have helped paralyzed rodents move again in several ways, including helping to regrow destroyed nerve cells in the spinal cord and successfully restoring myelin, a nerve fiber insulation that helps maintain the electrical conduction required to move.

_Scientists are working to create insulin-producing cells for diabetics, and cells that could produce the brain chemical needed by Parkinson's disease patients.

_Last year, researchers used human embryonic stem cells to create cells that act — in lab tests — like natural red blood cells, offering the potential to one day ramp up the blood supply.

_Embryonic stem cells aren't the only type. Studies also are under using adult stem cells, harvested from patients' own blood or bone marrow, and one using cells derived from the placenta is planned soon.

_Researchers also are learning to take ordinary cells and reprogram them to act like stem cells.

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