

Living with a partner reduces risk of Alzheimer's

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Living with a spouse or a partner decreases the risk of developing Alzheimer's and other dementia diseases. This according to a study by Krister Håkansson, researcher in psychology at Växjö University and Karolinska Institutet, Sweden. The results were presented for the first time yesterday at the world's largest dementia conference.

"This is, for me, an overwhelming start," says Mr Håkansson. "It's the first study I've done in this field, and the results are astounding. They indicate a very strong correlation between this type of social factor and the risk of developing dementia."

The new findings are based on data from a Finnish study, which was unique in that 2,000 people were examined at the age of around 50 and again twenty-one years later. Normally, dementia researchers only study late-life individuals. Previous research has shown that an active lifestyle, both intellectually and socially, can decrease the risk of developing dementia; since a shared life often entails considerable social and intellectual stimulation, the point of inquiry of this present study was whether living with a spouse or a partner can help to ward off dementia.

The results show that people living with a spouse or a partner in midlife ran a 50 per cent lower risk of developing dementia than people living alone, even when controlled for other risk factors, such as age.

How long a person had been single and for what reasons also affected the chances of developing dementia. Those who had lived alone their

entire adult life ran twice the risk, while those who were divorced in midlife and remained subsequently single ran three times the risk.

Widows and widowers ran the greatest risk.

Those at greatest risk of developing dementia diseases were people who had lost their partner before middle age and then continued to live as a widow or widower. The study showed that the chances of developing Alzheimer's for these individuals were six times greater than for married couples.

"This suggests two influencing factors – social and intellectual stimulation and trauma," says Mr Håkansson. "In practice, it shows how important it is to put resources into helping people who have undergone a crisis. If our interpretation will hold, such an intervention strategy could also be profitable for society considering the costs for dementia care."

The new results were presented at the 2008 Alzheimer's Association International Conference on Alzheimer's Disease (ICAD 2008), the world's largest in the field, which is currently being held in Chicago. For more news, visit the conference press room at http://www.alz.org/icad/press_room.asp

Krister Håkansson can already see several interesting lines of inquiry leading from this study. "Does it matter, for instance, if the relationship is a happy one or not? And does it matter if someone has always intended to live a single life or not?"

Source: Karolinska Institutet

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