

Middle-aged women experience more stress but have lower blood pressure

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Both blood pressure and serum lipid levels have improved in Swedish middle-aged women during the past 30 years. Levels of perceived mental stress, however, have increased significantly. These are the of a thesis presented at the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

The study is part of the Prospective Population Study of [Women](#) in Gothenburg, Sweden. This study was initiated at the end of the 1960s, when 1,462 middle-aged women were examined, and interviewed about their lifestyle and other matters. These women have subsequently been followed up into the 21st century, as well as compared with new generations of middle-aged women who have been examined at later dates, as part of the Prospective Population Study.

"The level of stress among middle-aged women was stable over a long period, but we can see that the number of women who perceive stress rises significantly after the early years of the 1980s. It is the women themselves who describe that they feel stressed, and other research has shown that it is the perceived stress that is most harmful", says general practitioner Dominique Hange, author of the thesis.

In 1968-1969, 28% of women stated that they suffered from nervousness, and 36% stated that they experienced stress. By 2004-2005, the percentage of women who experienced stress had more than doubled, to 75%.

"The women who stated at the end of the 1960s that they suffered from nervousness or perceived stress had a higher frequency of abdominal problems, asthma, headache, and frequent infections. This is true both at the time they were examined and nearly 25 years later. We could also in a longer perspective, see that the women who were mentally stressed had a higher mortality, and a somewhat higher incidence of breast cancer", says Dominique Hange.

The results presented in the thesis show also that the risk factors for [cardiovascular disease](#) among women have decreased during the past 30 years. The average [body mass index](#) of the women was the same in 2000 as it was in the 1960s, while mean [blood pressure](#) and levels of serumlipids were lower.

"More women today exercise in their leisure time, and we know that physically active people often have a lower blood pressure. Only 15% of women exercised regularly in the 1960s, while the figure today is around 40%", says Dominique Hange.

The Prospective Population Study of Women in Gothenburg, Sweden, was initiated at the end of the 1960s, when 1,400 middle-aged women took part in a health examination and answered extensive questionnaires about their lifestyles, and other matters. New generations have been invited to take part in the study since then. The follow-up of the women as they become older allows scientists to draw conclusions about various factors that have contributed to poor health and premature death.

More information:

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II. Hange D, Lissner L, Bengtsson C, Sundh V, Björkelund C. Perceived nervousness and moodiness associated with increased CVD but not cancer morbidity in pre- and postmenopausal women. Observations from the Population Study of Women in Gothenburg, Sweden. *International Journal of General Medicine* 2009;2:39-45

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IV. Hange D, Mehlig K, Lissner L, Guo X, Bengtsson C, Skoog I, Björkelund C. Perceived mental [stress](#) in middle-aged women - associations to psychosomatic symptoms, morbidity and mortality: Observations from the Population Study of Women in Gothenburg, Sweden. Manuscript

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