

Spouse Caregivers at Increased Risk for Stroke

January 14 2010

(PhysOrg.com) -- USF-led research indicates especially elevated risk for African-American men.

A study published in the February issue of [Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association](#) (Vol. 41 #2) reports that the strain associated with caring for a disabled spouse can significantly increase the caregiver's risk of stroke. The association and risk was especially elevated for African-American men who were spouse caregivers.

“Highly strained’ spouses have significantly elevated Framingham stroke risk scores as compared to spouses reporting no strain,” said William E. Haley, PhD, study lead author and professor in the University of South Florida’s School of Aging Studies. “[Psychological stress](#) is of great interest as a risk factor for stroke, and stress during family caregiving is a common [stressor](#). About 12 percent of Americans over age 45 report family caregiving responsibilities.”

The research team, which included researchers from the University of Alabama at Birmingham, found that the stroke risk for male/husband caregivers was greater than for female/wife caregivers. The [stroke risk](#) for African-American husbands was 10 points higher than for any other racial or ethnic group, with their 10-year risk for stroke estimated at 26.9 percent.

“Male spouse caregivers may need special caregiving support,” said Dr. Haley.

Researchers compared levels of stress, [depressive symptoms](#), available social networks, education, and age among 767 men and women whose average age was 68 and who were providing in-home care to a disabled spouse. Husbands were found less likely to report stress than wives and younger caregivers were found more likely to report high caregiving strain than older spouse caregivers. Previous studies have shown that African-Americans may under report [psychological distress](#) when compared to whites, and the researchers noted that there have been few studies examining the differential impact of stress in terms of race and sex.

Possible stressors for spouse caregivers can include: witnessing spouse suffering, financial strain, social isolation, providing demanding psychological and physical tasks as well as role discrepant responsibilities for men.

“It’s possible that the subgroup of husbands reporting high caregiving strain were lacking the paid and family assistance that many male caregivers receive,” suggested Dr. Haley.

Although the researchers did examine the relationship of caregiving strain to the well-validated Framingham indices of stroke and CHD risk, their data did not show a spouse caregiver-correlated higher risk for coronary heart disease (CHD), previously recognized as stress-related.

The researchers concluded that highly strained caregivers may benefit from caregiver intervention programs which have been shown to be effective for husbands and wives experiencing highly stressful caregiving.

Provided by University of South Florida

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