

# Feeling insecure in relationships may predispose people to later health problems, says research

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People who feel insecure about their attachments to others might be at higher risk for cardiovascular problems than those who feel secure in their relationships, according to a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

"This is the first study to examine adult attachment and a range of specific health conditions," said lead author Lachlan A. McWilliams, PhD, of Acadia University. He and a colleague examined data on 5,645 adults age 18 to 60 from the National Comorbidity Survey Replication and found that people who felt insecure in relationships or avoided getting close to others might be at a higher risk of developing several [chronic diseases](#).

Ratings of attachment insecurity were positively associated with a wide range of health problems, they found. "Much of the health research regarding attachment has focused on pain conditions, so we were initially surprised that some of our strongest findings involved conditions related to the [cardiovascular system](#)," said McWilliams.

Participants rated themselves on three attachment styles - secure, avoidant, and anxious. Secure attachment refers to feeling able to get close to others and being willing to have others depend on you. Avoidant attachment refers to difficulty getting close to others and trusting others. Anxious attachment refers to the tendency to worry about rejection, feel

needy and find others are reluctant to get close to you.

The participants answered a questionnaire about their histories of arthritis, chronic back or neck problems, frequent or severe headaches, other forms of chronic pain, seasonal allergies, stroke and heart attack. They also disclosed whether a doctor had told them they had heart disease, [high blood pressure](#), asthma, [chronic lung disease](#), diabetes or [high blood sugar](#), ulcers, epilepsy, seizures or cancer. They were also questioned regarding their history of psychological disorders.

After adjusting for demographic variables that could account for the health conditions, the authors found that avoidant attachment was positively associated with conditions defined primarily by pain (e.g., frequent or severe headaches). Anxious attachment was positively associated with a wider range of health conditions, including some defined primarily by pain and several involving the cardiovascular system (e.g., stroke, heart attack or high blood pressure).

The authors also adjusted for lifetime histories of common [psychological disorders](#) and found that people with anxious attachments were at a higher risk of chronic pain, stroke, heart attack, high blood pressure and ulcers.

"These findings suggest that insecure attachment may be a risk factor for a wide range of health problems, particularly cardiovascular diseases. Longitudinal research on this topic is needed to determine whether insecure attachment predicts the development of cardiovascular disease and the occurrence of cardiovascular events, such as heart attacks," said McWilliams. "The findings also raise the possibility that interventions aimed at improving attachment security could also have positive health outcomes."

**More information:** "Associations Between Adult Attachment Ratings

and Health Conditions: Evidence From the National Comorbidity Survey Replication," Lachlan A. McWilliams, PhD, and S. Jeffrey Bailey, PhD; Acadia University; Health Psychology, Vol. 29, No. 4.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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