

Increased risk of cardiovascular disease for relatives of cancer patients

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A current study shows that the risk for coronary heart disease and stroke increases by almost thirty per cent in a person whose partner has cancer. The cause is probably the negative stress to which the cancer patient's relative is exposed.

We know that the relatives of chronically ill patients, especially [cancer patients](#), have an increased risk of [mental illness](#) and depression. Previous studies have reported that [mental stress](#) and depression affect the nervous system, blood pressure and inflammation, which in turn can increase the risk of developing [coronary heart disease](#) and stroke.

Against this background, researcher Jianguang Ji and colleagues at the Centre for Primary Healthcare Research in Malmö investigated the specific risk for coronary [heart disease](#) and stroke when an individual's spouse is suffering from cancer. The study showed that the risk for coronary heart disease and stroke increased by between 13 and 29 per cent in people whose partner had cancer. The results are based on the national Swedish cancer registry and the Swedish inpatient registry.

A possible explanation for the increased risk could be that spouses share lifestyle and risk factors such as tobacco and alcohol consumption and diet and exercise habits, but that explanation falls when one takes into account that the risk of cardiovascular disease was only marginally increased (3-5%) in the time before the person's life partner became ill with cancer.

The researchers think instead that most of the increased risk is probably explained by the negative stress to which the spouse of the cancer-stricken patient is exposed.

"Our study shows that preventive efforts aimed at reducing psychological stress and negative risk factors are important for people whose life partner has got cancer", says Jianguang Ji:

"Previous studies have shown that preventive work can considerably reduce stress and anxiety in close relatives of patients".

More information: Increased risks of coronary heart disease and stroke among spousal caregivers of cancer patients, Ji J, Zöller B, Sundquist K, Sundquist J.

The study is published in the scientific journal *Circulation*. 2012, March 13

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