

Stress link to Alzheimer's goes under the spotlight

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Chronic stress is being investigated in a new Alzheimer's Society funded research project as a risk factor for developing dementia.

It is part of a £1.5 million package of six grants being given by the charity fighting to find a cause, cure and way to prevent the disease.

Clive Holmes, Professor of Biological Psychiatry at the University of Southampton, is lead investigator for the stress study. He says: "All of us go through stressful events. We are looking to understand how these may become a risk factor for the development of Alzheimer's.

"This is the first stage in developing ways in which to intervene with psychological or drug based treatments to fight the disease."

More effective coping methods for dealing with stress and a greater understanding of its biological impact may provide the answer.

The study scheduled to start in in less than a week will involve 18 months monitoring 140 people aged 50 and over with mild cognitive impairment.

The participants will be assessed for levels of stress and assessed for any progression from mild cognitive impairment to [dementia](#).

About 60 per cent of people with mild cognitive impairment are known to go on to develop Alzheimer's.

Professor Holmes adds: "There is a lot of variability in how quickly that progression happens; one factor increasingly implicated in the process is chronic stress. That could be driven by a big change – usually negative – such as a prolonged illness, injury or a major operation.

"We are looking at two aspects of stress relief – physical and psychological – and the body's response to that experience. Something such as bereavement or a traumatic experience – possibly even moving home – is also a potential factor."

Alzheimer's Society research manager, Anne Corbett, says: "The study will look at the role chronic stress plays in the progression from mild thinking and memory problems - Mild Cognitive Impairment - to Alzheimer's disease.

"We feel this is a really important area of research that needs more attention. The results could offer clues to new treatments or better ways of managing the condition.

"It will also be valuable to understand how different ways of coping with stressful life events could influence the risk of developing Alzheimer's disease."

The participants in the trial will be compared to a group of 70 people without memory problems, who will be tested as a 'control group'. All the people taking part will be asked to complete cognitive tests in order to track their cognitive health.

Questionnaires will assess their personality type, style of coping with stressful events and their perceived level of social support and mood.

The process will be repeated after 18 months to measure any conversion from mild cognitive impairment to Alzheimer's disease. Stressful life

events will also be recorded.

The researchers will take blood and saliva samples every six months to measure biological markers of stress. Blood samples will measure immune function and the saliva samples will track levels of cortisol, which is released by the body in response to chronic stress.

A number of illnesses are known to develop earlier or are made worse by [chronic stress](#), including heart disease, diabetes, cancer and multiple sclerosis. Surprisingly little research has been done in people with mild cognitive impairment or Alzheimer's disease in relation to their experience of stress.

Provided by University of Southampton

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