

Physical health problems substantially increase use of mental health services, study shows

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People who experience a physical health problem, from diabetes and back pain to cancer or heart disease, are three times more likely to seek mental health care than patients who report having no physical ailment, according to a new study by Oregon State University researchers.

The study, which is now online in the journal *Health Services Research*, indicates there is a need for better-coordinated care between physical and [mental health providers](#). It is the first nationally representative study that statistically shows a major link between [physical health](#) and [mental health](#)

"I see this study as a way to set benchmark data so that policy makers can determine how to best transition to a system that hopefully will coordinate physical and mental care," said lead author Jangho Yoon, a health policy economist with OSU who specializes in [mental health policy](#) issues.

"The [Affordable Care](#) Act is supposed to have better coordinated care and interplay between physical and mental [health providers](#), so this has really important implications because before our study, [baseline data](#) didn't exist."

Yoon used data from 2004 and 2005 Medical Expenditure Panel Surveys to identify more than 6,000 adults for his study. He only used people

who had not reported a previous physical or mental health condition. Compared to those who did not have a physical health problem, people who developed a physical health condition had a threefold increase in the likelihood of seeking [mental health care](#).

Interestingly, even after he controlled for those who developed the most catastrophic medical conditions, such as cancer, stroke and heart attack, he found the same results.

"The interplay between our physical and mental health has long been suspected," Yoon said. "When I have back pain, I feel stressed. And if it impacts my ability to work, or to do my usual activities, then I can feel upset or even a bit depressed. But no large scale studies existed that showed the statistical proof of this correlation."

Yoon, who is an assistant professor in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences at OSU, said the study included people who sought mental health providers, prescriptions for mental health issues, or both.

He said the study also found that those patients who said they perceived their health issue as severe were more likely to seek mental health services.

The researchers said a simple screener survey, such as the 16-question Substance Abuse/Mental Illness Screener (SAMISS), used in a busy clinical setting could be an effective tool to help health providers attain proper mental health treatment for their patients.

"This is a win-win," Yoon said. "There is a chance of cost-savings in our medical system if we identify potential mental health problems early, before they become more severe. And more importantly, coordinated care and early intervention leads to better health outcomes, and better care for the patient."

Provided by Oregon State University

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