

Clear link between perceived stress and an increased incidence of psychosomatic symptoms

June 3 2013

In four out of ten cases, long-term stress suffered by women leads to some form of physical complaint. This is shown by a study of 1,500 women carried out at the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

Within the Population Study of [Women](#) in Gothenburg, researchers at the University of Gothenburg's Sahlgrenska Academy have followed around 1,500 women since the late 1960s.

The latest study within the project, which focuses primarily on stress linked to psychosomatic symptoms, showed that one in five middle-aged women had experienced constant or frequent stress during the last five years. The experience of stress was highest within the 40 to 60 age range, and those women who were stressed were more often single and/or [smokers](#).

Among those women who reported stress, 40 percent had psychosomatic symptoms in the form of aches and pain in their muscles and [joints](#), 28 percent suffered from headaches or migraines, and the same proportion reported gastrointestinal complaints.

"Even when the results have been adjusted for smoking, [BMI](#) and [physical activity](#), we can see a clear link between perceived stress and an increased incidence of psychosomatic symptoms," says Dominique

Hange, researcher at the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg.

Of those women who experienced long-term stress but who did not report any stress-related problems when the study began in 1968-69, 27 percent had new symptoms in the form of muscular and [joint pain](#) when they were followed up 12 years later, and around 15 percent experienced new complaints in the form of [headaches](#) and/or [gastrointestinal problems](#).

"Since 1968, women's lifestyles have changed in many ways," continues [Dominique](#) Hange. "For example, many more women now work outside the home. Naturally, these changes can affect the experience of stress. But although we've used exactly the same question ever since 1968, we can't take it for granted that the term 'stress' has exactly the same meaning today. It might also be more socially accepted today to acknowledge one's experience of stress."

The researchers have been able to follow all 1,500 of the women who took part at the beginning of the study in 1968 up until today, including information about cause of death. The studies do not show any clear signs that stress leads to an increased risk of an early death.

"The most important conclusion is that single women, women who do not work outside the home and women who smoke are particularly vulnerable to stress. Here, we see a greater need for preventive measures from society."

The next stage will involve the researchers evaluating which methods can be used within healthcare, particularly within primary care, in order to help the individual to deal with stress-triggered complaints and illnesses, and to study how the individual and society can reduce the risk of exposure to stress at work.

The article "Perceived mental stress in women associated with [psychosomatic symptoms](#), but not mortality: observations from the Population Study of Women in Gothenburg, Sweden" was published in the *International Journal of General Medicine*.

About the study

The Population Study of Women in Gothenburg began in the late 1960s. In the study, around 1,500 middle-aged women who were representative of the female population of Gothenburg underwent a medical examination and were asked questions about factors such as their health. Since then, these women have been followed up on a regular basis from 1968/69 until the most recent follow-up in 2005/06.

In the study in question, 1,500 women were asked: Have you experienced any period of mental stress (one month or more)? By mental [stress](#), we mean that you have been irritable, tense, nervous, anxious, afraid or anguished, or experienced sleep disturbances in connection with worrying about your work, health, family, conflict with those around you (at home, at work) or for some other reason.

More information: The article Perceived mental stress in women associated with psychosomatic symptoms, but not mortality: observations from the Population Study of Women in Gothenburg, Sweden was published in the *International Journal of General Medicine*.

Provided by University of Gothenburg

Citation: Clear link between perceived stress and an increased incidence of psychosomatic symptoms (2013, June 3) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-06-link-stress-incidence-psychosomatic-symptoms.html>

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