

# Single working moms carry a heart burden

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(HealthDay)—Single working moms, who are often pressed for time and money, may have to worry about their heart health, too.

Compared to married mothers with jobs, single working mothers in the United States have a higher risk of [heart disease](#) and stroke, researchers found. They're also more likely to smoke—a known heart risk—than women with other work and [family patterns](#), said Frank van Lenthe, co-author of the new study.

Losing the support of a partner, along with the second income, "may cause stress and result in unhealthy behaviors," said van Lenthe. He is an associate professor of social epidemiology at Erasmus University Medical Center in Rotterdam, the Netherlands.

Before this study, he said, "We did not know much about the role of work, per se, and its link to cardiovascular risk for women, and we did not know that it was single working mothers who were most at risk."

For the study, van Lenthe's team examined data from two large surveys that included more than 18,000 U.S. and European women. One was the U.S. Health and Retirement Study; the other, the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe. This helped identify work and family patterns for women born in the United States and in 13 European countries between 1935 and 1956.

About 11 percent of U.S. women and 5 percent of Europeans were single working mothers. Others were single working women without children; stay-at-home married mothers; and married working mothers who may have stayed home temporarily but returned to the work force.

The researchers looked next at self-reports from the women about diseases and risk factors. The investigators compared heart disease and stroke risks among the different work and family patterns, and also between Europeans and Americans.

Compared to European women, U.S. women had nearly three times the

risk of heart disease and more than double the risk of stroke. Overall, single working mothers had 1.4 times the risk of heart disease and 1.7 times the risk of stroke compared to married working mothers.

And single mothers in both the United States and in Europe were more likely to smoke.

In general, the researchers found what other studies have also concluded—that women who were consistently working, married and had children were the healthiest of all.

"Work and marriage offer, or at least increase the possibility of, financial and social security," and married mothers may get help from partners in raising children, van Lenthe noted.

But he and his colleagues said the work and family patterns only explain a small part of the health disadvantage seen among U.S. women compared to European women. Weaker policies to support mothers in the U.S. labor market may also help explain the differences, he said.

The study could not prove that being a single working mom caused the increased health risks.

However, the study findings didn't surprise Dr. Suzanne Steinbaum, director of women's heart health at Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

"There is no job more time-consuming, emotionally demanding and stressful than being a mom," said Steinbaum, who wasn't involved in the study.

"So there is nobody who is going to have more stress—especially when you add in the financial issues—than a single mother," she said. All that

stress can take a toll on self-care, Steinbaum explained.

And the differences found in the study between U.S. and European [women](#) are not unexpected either, Steinbaum added. "They give a lot more family support in Europe, and that actually helps," she said.

Study co-author van Lenthe suggested that generous maternity leaves, affordable childcare and more flexibility in work schedules would help single working mothers preserve their health.

"There is a need to develop wider policies to support [single mothers](#) in both the United States and in Europe," he added.

For now, Steinbaum tells single [working mothers](#): "Every single day, you have to fit in those moments to take care of yourself. If you are sick, you cannot be a good parent."

One of her suggestions: Instead of thinking you have no time to exercise, find a workout you can do with your children. "Go for a bike ride together," she said. Besides getting a workout, you are modeling healthy behaviors for your child, which is another good thing, she added.

The study was published in the June 16 online edition of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

**More information:** To learn more about heart disease, visit the [American Heart Association](#).

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