

Being on a zero-hours contract is bad for your health

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Young adults who are employed on zero-hours contracts are less likely to be in good health, and are at higher risk of poor mental health than workers with stable jobs.

Researchers from the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at UCL Institute

of Education (IOE) analysed data on more than 7,700 people living in England who were born in 1989-90 and are being followed by a study called Next Steps.

They found that at age 25, people on zero-hours contracts and those who were unemployed were less likely to report feeling healthy, compared to those in more secure employment.

Those with zero-hours contracts were also at greater risk of reporting symptoms of psychological distress. However, [young adults](#) who were unemployed were more than twice as likely to suffer from [mental ill health](#) compared to those who were in work.

And, although shift workers were at no greater risk than those working regular hours to be in poor [health](#), they were more likely to have psychological problems.

The lead author, Dr Morag Henderson, said: "Millennials have faced a number of challenges as they entered the world of work. They joined the [labour market](#) at the height of the most recent financial crisis and faced higher than ever university fees and student loan debt.

"There is evidence that those with a precarious relationship to the labour market, such as [shift workers](#), zero-hours [contract](#) holders and the unemployed are more at risk of [poor mental health](#) and physical health than their peers.

"One explanation for these findings is that financial stress or the stress associated with having a low-status job increases the risk of poor mental health. It may also be that the worry of having no work or irregular work triggers physical symptoms of stress, including chest pain, headaches and muscle tension."

Two thirds of 25-year-olds were employed full-time, 1 in 8 (12%) were employed part time, and 7 per cent were unemployed. Around a quarter (23%) worked shifts, and 5 per cent had zero-hours contracts.

By occupation, the largest proportion of young adults (15%) were in professional roles, such as teachers, engineers and accountants. A further 14 per cent had professional support roles, including paramedics, librarians and pharmacists, 9 per cent were in administrative or secretarial occupations and 8 per cent had manual roles, such as general labourers and forestry workers.

The findings took into account background factors such as gender, ethnicity, social class, prior mental health, sleep duration, frequency of exercise and weight.

Craig Thorley, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), said: "Efforts to improve the UK's mental health must recognise the important relationship between health and work. More people than ever are working on zero-hours contracts in the UK, and this new data shows this to be contributing to poorer mental health among younger workers.

"Government and employers must work together to promote better quality jobs which enhance, rather than damage, mental health and wellbeing. Without this, we risk seeing increased demand for [mental health](#) services, reduced productivity, and more young people moving on to out-of-work sickness benefits."

Provided by University College London

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