

Procrastinators may delay all the way to worse health

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College students who routinely cram at the last minute may not only see

their grades suffer, but their health, too, a new study suggests.

Researchers found that of more than 3,500 college students they followed, those who scored high on a procrastination scale were more likely to report certain [health issues](#) nine months later. The list included body aches, poor sleep, and depression and anxiety symptoms.

Experts said the findings do not prove that procrastination, per se, directly caused those problems—for example, by delaying a medical visit and allowing an irritating health issue to worsen.

But they do reinforce the fact that procrastination, when chronic, is a red flag.

"Everyone procrastinates, but not everyone is a procrastinator," said Joseph Ferrari, a [psychology professor](#) at DePaul University in Chicago, who has been studying the subject since the 1980s.

Dragging your feet on doing your taxes, or something equally unpleasant, is normal. Chronic procrastination is different, and it's not just a benign personality quirk, said Ferrari, who was not involved in the new study.

When procrastination is a way of life—rearing its head at work, home and in relationships—that's a problem, Ferrari said.

It's also common: In his own research, Ferrari has found that about 20% of adults qualify as chronic procrastinators—making it more prevalent than mental health disorders like depression and phobias.

And studies have suggested there are [health consequences](#) in the long run: Chronic procrastination has been linked to higher risks of depression and anxiety, as well as [physical conditions](#) like [high blood pressure](#) and heart disease.

Ferrari said that might not be due to the procrastinating itself, but to the persistent stress and worry that go with it. Habitually choosing not to act is a maladaptive way of responding to life's daily challenges.

The new study, published online Jan. 4 in *JAMA Network Open*, focused on college students—a group especially prone to procrastination, based on past research.

According to lead researcher Fred Johansson, of Sophiahemmet University in Stockholm, that might be related to the "freedom" [college students](#) typically have. Their lives have relatively little structure, and deadlines are often far off—which, Johansson said, can allow plenty of room for procrastination.

His team wanted to see whether students who ranked high on the procrastination scale were at any greater risk of subsequent mental or [physical symptoms](#) than their peers.

The investigators looked at data on 3,525 students at eight Swedish universities who were part of a larger health study. At the outset, the students were assessed for depression and anxiety symptoms, unhealthy lifestyle habits and bodily pain.

Three months after that, they completed a standard procrastination questionnaire.

Overall, the study found, students at the high end of the procrastination scale were in worse shape nine months later. Compared with their non-procrastinating peers, they reported more problems with depression and anxiety, as well as more upper-body pain.

They also gave lower ratings to their sleep quality, got less exercise and reported more loneliness than other students did, the findings showed.

Johansson said the links between procrastination and health issues were "rather weak"—meaning they didn't point to a strong effect. But the connections held up even when the researchers accounted for students' symptoms at the start of the study.

That suggests it's not a case of "reverse causation," where students with mental or physical health issues tended to put off work.

As for why [procrastination](#) would harm people's health, Johansson agreed that stress could be an important reason. Chronic procrastinators may also fall short on "wellness behaviors," he noted—such as, in this study, physical activity.

What makes someone a procrastinator? There's no evidence it's written in your genes, according to Ferrari. "It's not, 'I was born this way. This is just the way I am,'" he said.

And that's good news. "Because it's learned, you can also unlearn it," Ferrari said.

However, changing is no simple matter of following a few tips on time management, he added. A true chronic procrastinator will always find excuses to put things off.

"You have to change your thinking," Ferrari advised. One of the underlying issues, he noted, is that chronic procrastinators center on themselves—a mindset of "me" rather than "we."

According to Ferrari, a form of talk therapy called [cognitive behavioral therapy](#) can help the chronic procrastinator address the roots of the problem.

Johansson agreed, noting there is clinical trial evidence supporting the

effectiveness of cognitive behavioral therapy.

"It requires some effort," Johansson said, "so it is not something you can do while trying to meet a specific deadline. But the evidence suggests that even procrastinators can change their behavior."

More information: Fred Johansson et al, Associations Between Procrastination and Subsequent Health Outcomes Among University Students in Sweden, *JAMA Network Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.49346](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2022.49346)

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