

Cognitive therapy has lasting effect on hypochondriacs

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People that suffer from health anxiety (Hypochondriacs) use very much of their time and energy on checking whether or not they have a serious disease. This has often negative effects on their social life, work, and family life, to the extent that their quality of life is strongly reduced.

Researchers at the University of Bergen have found that only 16 hours of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) can have very positive effects on hypochondriacs 10 years after treatment.

"This is the first study that follows up hypochondriacs for such a long period. It shows that CBT has good effects both one year and 10 years after therapy," says psychiatrist Kari-Elise Veddegjærde, Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Clinical Science at the University of Bergen (UiB). The study is published in *The British Journal of Psychiatry*.

In the study, Veddegjærde followed 50 patients that had struggled with health anxiety for a long time. Each received 16 hours of CBT from the well-known Norwegian therapist, Professor Ingvard Wilhelmsen at UiB. The patients answered questionnaires about their quality of life before, during and after the treatment. Other therapies and their drug use was taken into account.

"We know that CBT is an [effective treatment](#) against [health anxiety](#), but we did not know how long the effect would last. This study shows that the treatment maintains its positive effect over a long time period," Veddegjærde says.

Veddegjærde is hoping that the results from the study will lead to more psychologists and psychiatrist offering CBT in the future. From her own practice, she has experienced that only a couple of hours is enough for some patients. "Since the study shows that only a few hours with CBT has [positive effects](#) until 10 years after treatment, I hope that more regular GPs and specialists will start offering this type of treatment," says Kari-Elise Veddegjærde.

Facts:Health anxiety and cognitive behavioral therapy

- Health anxiety (hypochondria) is characterized by an ongoing belief that one has a serious disease or is going to have one. Often, the patient focuses on one specific disease. The most common are cancer, [heart disease](#) and neurological disease.
- The patients use a great deal of their time checking for disease symptoms.
- Approximately 3 percent of the persons visiting their GP suffer from hypochondria in Norway.
- The aim of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is to make patients more attentive to their unconscious mindset, by confronting the patients with questions. When the [patients](#) become more aware of their own thought patterns, it becomes possible to change them.

More information: Kari-Elise Frøystad Veddegjærde et al. Long-term effect of cognitive–behavioural therapy in patients with Hypochondriacal Disorder, *BJPsych Open* (2020). [DOI: 10.1192/bjo.2020.22](#)

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