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Unexplained Chest Pain Can Be Due To Stress

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Summary: Each year, many people seek emergency treatment for unexplained chest pains. A new thesis indicates several common factors among those affected, including stress at work, anxiety, depression and a sedentary lifestyle.

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FULL STORY

Each year, many people seek emergency treatment for unexplained chest pains. A thesis from the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, Sweden, indicates several common factors among those affected, including stress at work, anxiety, depression and a sedentary lifestyle.

Chest pain is a common reason for patients to seek emergency treatment. A considerable number of patients are diagnosed with unexplained chest pain, which means that the pain cannot be linked to biomedical factors such as heart disease, or some other illness. The patient group is significant in size, with just over 20,000 patients seeking hospital treatment in 2006, and so far researchers have been unable to identify specific causes for unexplained chest pain.

"Many suffer from recurring bouts of pain over several years, while the healthcare services are unable to find out what's causing it," says Registered nurse Annika Janson Fagring, the author of the thesis.

In her thesis, Annika Janson Fagring describes and analyses symptoms among patients with unexplained chest pain. The results show that most of them are middle-aged, and that over a third of those affected were born outside Sweden. The chest pain had a negative impact on the patients' daily life in the form of tiredness, anxiety and fear of death.

"The main difference between women and men with unexplained chest pain is that men were more likely to perceive their lives and jobs as being stressful, while women tended more to suffer from symptoms of depressions and anxiety," says Annika Janson Fagring.

The patients, both men and women, experienced more symptoms of depression and anxiety, and work-related stress when compared with a reference group of people who were not suffering from heart disease. The male patients were more physically active in their spare time than the female patients, but compared with the reference group, both the men and the women with unexplained chest pain led a more sedentary lifestyle.

The thesis also looks at the development of symptoms and the prognosis for patients with unexplained chest pain over a period of time, compared with patients suffering from angina and patients who had suffered a heart attack. A register study revealed that from 1987 up until 2000, the number of patients with diagnosed unexplained chest pain increased, and then levelled out. The number of patients with angina increased up until 1994 and has since fallen, while the number of patients who have suffered heart attacks has fallen throughout the whole period examined.

There were fewer deaths among patients with unexplained chest pain a year after they became ill, compared with patients that became ill with angina or suffered heart attacks. Deaths among men a year after falling ill with unexplained chest pain were a third higher compared with men in the rest of the population, while women did not display any increased risk of death.

Annika Janson Fagring says that the thesis shows that it is important to improve knowledge and understanding of the symptoms experienced by patients with unexplained chest pain, in order to be able to offer more individualised care.

Thesis for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Institute of Health and Care Sciences at the Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg.

Title of thesis: Unexplained chest pain in men and women – symptom perception and outcome.

The thesis was defended on Friday 6 February in Gothenburg, Sweden.

Opponent: Professor Anders Waldenström, Umeå University, Umeå

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