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Stressful jobs raise men's blood pressure

Difficult work could damage circulatory system, study finds

Associated Press

BOSTON – Men with stressful jobs have higher-than-usual blood pressure even when they sleep, suggesting that such difficult work permanently damages their circulatory systems, a new study indicates.

Working women were less likely than men to show the ill effects of job stress, but their blood pressure is more likely to soar in response to strains at home, especially problems with children, a separate study found.

The studies were among several presented yesterday that strengthen the belief that highly demanding jobs in which people have little control are especially bad for health. But they cautioned that what happens off the job matters too.

"It would be naive to think that job strain explains everything. It's only part of the day," said Dr. Thomas Pickering of New York Hospital.

To delve into these questions, researchers hooked up volunteers to portable monitors and watched how their blood pressure went up or down in response to the day's challenges. They presented their findings at a meeting of the Society of Behavioural Medicine.

Dr. Joseph Schwartz and others from the State University of New York at Stony Brook followed 373 men and women who worked in nine different places in New York City.

They found that people in highly demanding jobs with little autonomy had significantly higher blood pressures than did those in less taxing situations, including people with stressful jobs who could make their own decisions and those in easy-going positions who had little opportunity to think for themselves.

Those in high-stress, low-freedom jobs had blood pressures that averaged 137 over 85, versus about 129 over 83 for the other people. The difference grows progressively greater as people get older. Normal blood pressure is 120 over 80.

Ordinarily, blood pressure fluctuates over the course of the day, depending on a person's activity, and this may be harmless. However, for those in the high-strain positions, blood pressure tended to stay high. Their readings were above those of other people's while at home in the evening and even as they slept.

"No one can say which came first, the job stress or the high blood pressure," Dr. Schwartz said.

For instance, it's possible that people with type A personalities already have a tendency to high blood pressure and are attracted to punishing jobs.

However, he said his data suggest that the "cumulative effect of the exposure to stress over time" permanently raises blood pressure.

Dr. Kathleen Light of the University of North Carolina conducted similar studies on white-collar professionals in their 30s and found that job strain was generally related to blood pressure in men but not in women.

REFERENCE: Dolan, C.A., Sherwood, A. and K.C. Light: Cognitive coping strategies and blood pressure responses to real-life stress in healthy young men. *Health Psychology* **11**(#4): 233-240 (1992). [Arts Library call number: PER R726.5.H44X]

NOTE: The studies by Drs. Pickering and Schwartz, referred to in the left-hand and middle columns of the article reprinted above, do not appear (as of February, 1995) to have been abstracted by *Medline* or to have been published in *Health Psychology*, in *Behavioural Medicine* [Arts Library call number: PER RB152.J67] or in the *Journal of Behavioural Medicine.* [Arts Library call number: PER R726.5.J6X]

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