

Beat: Health

STRESS IN OLDER PEOPLE INCREASES RISK FOR PRE-ALZHEIMER S CONDITION

PRELUDE FULL-BLOWN ALZHEIMER S DISEASE

PARIS - NEW YORK, 13.12.2015, 11:23 Time

USPA NEWS - Feeling stressed out increases the likelihood that elderly people will develop mild cognitive impairment, often a prelude to full-blown Alzheimer's disease. In a new study, scientists at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Health System...

Feeling stressed out increases the likelihood that elderly people will develop mild cognitive impairment, often a prelude to full-blown Alzheimer's disease. In a new study, scientists at Albert Einstein College of Medicine and Montefiore Health System found that highly stressed participants were more than twice as likely to become impaired than those who were not. Because stress is treatable, the results suggest that detecting and treating stress in older people might help delay or even prevent the onset of Alzheimer's. The findings were published online on December 11, in 'Alzheimer Disease & Associated Disorders'.

Each year, approximately 470,000 Americans are diagnosed with Alzheimer's dementia. Many of them first experience mild cognitive impairment, a pre-dementia condition that significantly increases the risk of developing Alzheimer's in the following months or years. This study looked at the connection between chronic stress and "amnesic mild cognitive impairment" (aMCI), the most common type of MCI, which is primarily characterized by memory loss.

The researchers studied data collected from 507 people enrolled in the Einstein Aging Study (EAS), a community-based cohort of older adults. Since 1993, the EAS has systematically recruited adults 70 and over who live in Bronx County, NY. Participants undergo annual assessments that include clinical evaluations, a neuropsychological battery of tests, psychosocial measures, medical history, assessments of daily-living activities and reports (by participants and those close to them) of memory and other cognitive complaints.

Starting in 2005, the EAS began assessing stress using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS). This widely used 14-item measure of psychological stress was designed to be sensitive to chronic stress (due to ongoing life circumstances, possible future events and other causes) perceived over the previous month. PSS scores range from 0 to 56, with higher scores indicating greater perceived stress.

The diagnosis of aMCI was based on standardized clinical criteria including the results of recall tests and reports of forgetfulness from the participants or from others. All 507 enrollees were free of aMCI or dementia at their initial PSS assessment and subsequently underwent at least one annual follow-up evaluation. They were followed for an average of 3.6 years.

71 of the 507 participants were diagnosed with aMCI during the study. The greater the participants' stress level, the greater their risk for developing aMCI: for every 5 point increase in their PSS scores, their risk of developing aMCI increased by 30 %. Similar results were obtained when participants were divided into five groups (quintiles) based on their PSS scores. Participants in the highest-stress quintile (high stress) were nearly 2.5 times more likely to develop aMCI than were people in the remaining four quintiles combined (low stress). When comparing the two groups, participants in the high-stress group were more likely to be female and have less education and higher levels of depression.

To confirm that stress was independently increasing risk for aMCI in this study, the researchers assessed whether depression (which increases the risk for stress as well as for cognitive impairment and Alzheimer's diseases) might have influenced the results. They found that depression did not significantly affect the relationship observed between stress and the onset of aMCI. Similarly, stress's impact on cognitive status was unaffected if participants possessed at least one e4 allele of the APOE gene, which increases their risk for developing late-onset Alzheimer's.

The study is titled 'Influence of perceived stress on incident amnesic mild cognitive impairment: Results from the Einstein Aging Study.'

The research was funded by the National Institutes of Health, the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, the Leonard

and Sylvia Marx Foundation and the Czap Foundation. The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Source : Albert Einstein College of Medicine

Ruby BIRD

<http://www.portfolio.uspa24.com/>

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Article online:

<https://www.uspa24.com/bericht-6708/stress-in-older-people-increases-risk-for-pre-alzheimer-s-condition.html>

Editorial office and responsibility:

V.i.S.d.P. & Sect. 6 MDStV (German Interstate Media Services Agreement): Ruby BIRD & Yasmina BEDDOU (Journalists/Directors)

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Editorial program service of General News Agency:

United Press Association, Inc.

3651 Lindell Road, Suite D168

Las Vegas, NV 89103, USA

(702) 943.0321 Local

(702) 943.0233 Facsimile

info@unitedpressassociation.org

info@gna24.com

www.gna24.com