

Depression raises stroke risk in mid-aged women

What you need to know: A 12-year Australian longitudinal study published in *Stroke: Journal of the American Heart Association* revealed that depressed women in their 40's and 50's have a two-fold risk of having a stroke. Out of 10,000 middle-aged women, 177 cases of stroke were documented. Although the risk is low, depression does pose a strong, undesirable effect on stroke.

What is this research about?

Stroke is a major cause of disability and death especially among older women, mainly due to their longer life expectancy compared with men. On that same note, depression is a growing public health issue. Stroke is known to be a risk factor for depression; however, the role of depression as a risk factor for stroke has been less well studied.

What did the researchers do?

To determine the extent that depression influences the risk of stroke in mid-aged women, researchers investigated data from more than 10,000 women aged between 47 and 52. The women answered questions about their physical and mental health, and other pertinent information in surveys completed at three-yearly intervals from 1998 to 2010.

What did the researchers find?

After analysing the responses, 24% (2,500) of women were classified as depressed. Self-reported responses and death records revealed 177 first-time strokes (1.5%). Depressed women had 2.4 times higher risk of stroke than women who were not depressed. Eliminating other stroke risk factors – like age, socioeconomic status, smoking, alcohol and physical activity, high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and a high body mass index (BMI) – women suffering depression were still 1.9 times more likely to have a stroke.

Exactly how depression increases stroke is unclear, as is whether treating it can reduce the risk.

While the risk of stroke is low in mid-aged women, and it is not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship, depression does have a strong adverse effect on stroke risk in mid-aged women.

How can you use this research?

The findings from this research highlight the need for better and more targeted approaches to preventing and treating depression in middle-aged women.

It is unclear why depression is so strongly linked to stroke in this age group but the body's inflammatory and immunological processes and their effects on blood vessels may play a part.

Further research is needed on women of different ages within the same population to help identify how depression impacts their risk of stroke at different stages in life.

Keywords: Cerebrovascular disease, depression, mental health, stroke

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Citation: Jackson CA, Mishra GD. Depression and Risk of Stroke in Mid-aged Women: A Prospective Longitudinal Study. *Stroke*. 2013;44:00-00 doi: 10.1161/STROKEAHA.113.001147