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**How the 'worried well' are making themselves sick**

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This is why you need to dump Doctor Google.

Worrying about your symptoms could make you sick.

Health-related anxiety potentially increases your odds of a heart attack or angina by about 70 per cent, according to a [European study](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/bjopen-2016-012914) published in the British medical journal*BMJ Open* today.

From a study of more than 7000 people, 6 per cent of those who needlessly stressed about getting sick, known as "the worried well," went on to develop ischemic heart disease within 10 years compared with 3 per cent of their carefree counterparts.

When the researchers adjusted out known risk factors for heart disease such as smoking and lack of exercise, the worried well had an even larger increased risk compared with the unworried.

And the more intense a person's fear of getting sick was, the greater their chances of developing heart illness became.

"If persons with high levels of health anxiety stay alert with the intention to better 'control' and 'detect' early signs of severe somatic diseases, it might contribute to unintentional harmful effects as the autonomous activation associated with anxiety in general likely is associated with increased risk of IHD," the author's wrote.

"At best, this finding might encourage patients to seek treatment for health anxiety and to trust their heart."

Their research used the Hordaland Health Study (HUSK), which followed 7052 Norwegians for 12 years from 1997, and the Cardiovascular Diseases in Norway Project, which collected data on heart disease deaths and hospitalisations from 1994-2009.

People were ranked on their health anxiety levels using the Whitely test, which requires participants to give a score of 1 to 5 on how much they relate to each of 14 statements.

Questions include  "Do you think there is something seriously wrong with your body?" and "If you feel ill and someone tells you that you are looking better, do you become annoyed?"

An overall score of more than 31 out of a possible 55 meant a participant had health anxiety.

***"At best, this finding might encourage patients to seek treatment for health anxiety and to trust their heart."***

The researchers – led by Dr Line Iden Berge, from the Sandviken University Hospital in Bergen, Norway – also found the worried well said they exercised less often and were more likely to smoke.

They wrote that no firm conclusions about cause and effect could be drawn from their study and warned that health anxiety often sat alongside other mental health issues.

Cardiologist David Colquhoun, chair of the clinical council of the Cardiac Society of Australia and New Zealand, said there were known psycho-social risk factors that were as important at predicting heart attack as cholesterol and blood pressure levels.

He was part of a Heart Foundation expert committee [that found depression and social isolation](https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2013/199/3/psychosocial-risk-factors-coronary-heart-disease)were independent predictors of heart attack; and said many people who experienced depression often also had anxiety.

"It may be that if you're obsessively worried about your health this is a marker of you being anxious about other things and this confirms previous data that it increases your personal risk of having a heart attack," Professor Colquhoun said.

"Perceived stress, whether its marital, work or financial, is a powerful predictor of heart attack."

Extreme anxiety could cause a heart attack because the body was flooded with adrenaline, which drives the heart rate up and can cause a blood clot in the artery.

"Being constantly on alert appears to stimulate growth of the cholesterol plaque in the artery and then severe stress can trigger rupturing of the plaque," he said.

Professor Colquhoun said people with high risk factors like a family history of heart attack should be keeping an eye on their symptoms, and worry is quite rational in some circumstances.

Hypochondriasis, also called hypochondria, which describes abnormal chronic anxiety about one's health, [was dropped](http://www.mayoclinic.org/medical-professionals/clinical-updates/psychiatry-psychology/diagnostic-statistical-manual-mental-disorders-redefines-hypochondriasis) from the latest edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

It was replaced with two new conditions: somatic symptom disorder – which refers to patients with one or more chronic bodily symptom about which they were excessively concerned; and illness anxiety disorder.

Illness anxiety relates to patients who may or may not have a medical condition, have heightened bodily sensations and are anxious about the possibility of unknown illness, which they may obsessively research.

Psychiatrist Steve Ellen, the director of psychosocial oncology at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne, said once identified, health anxiety was very treatable but many people who experience it don't seek help from mental health practitioners.

"The patients who believe they've got something wrong with them, who are phobic about illnesses, they don't come to shrinks, they go to physical doctors to get tests," he said.

Associate Professor Ellen said every day the average person has about a dozen physical symptoms that are mostly dismissed. "But if you're phobic or anxious about your health you'll over interpret those symptoms," he said.

Heart disease remains the leading cause of death in Australia, accounting for 19,777 deaths in 2015.

**For help with anxiety or depression call Lifeline on 131 114 or beyondblue on 1300 224 636.**