'Worried well' really do make themselves ill, study suggests

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The worried well – people who are anxious they will develop a series illness – really do get sick, researchers have found.

A new [study](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/bjopen-2016-012914)discovered that those people who were convinced there was something wrong with them, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, were 73 per cent more likely to develop heart disease within 10 years.

Nowegian researchers from the University of Bergen says the finding could leave doctors in a quandry about how best to treat patients, who show no symptoms, but are clearly worried about their health.

Dr Line Iden Berge, [Division of Psychiatry at Bergen](http://www.uib.no/en/node/36362), said: “These findings illustrate the dilemma for clinicians between reassuring the patient that current physical symptoms of anxiety do not represent heart disease, contrasted against the emerging knowledge on how anxiety, over time, may be causally associated with increased risk of disease.”

Anxiety is a known risk factor for heart disease, and health anxiety, which describes persistent preoccupation with having or acquiring a serious illness, appears to be no exception say the researchers.

The findings are based on a study of 7,052 people in their 50s who were questioned about their health, lifestyle and anxiety. They were followed up over 10 years and within that time those who scored highly on the anxiety tests were nearly twice as likely to have developed heart disease, even when other health conditions, diet and smoking were taken into account.

The proportion of those succumbing to heart disease was twice as high (just over 6 per cent) among those who displayed health anxiety compared with around 3 per cent for those.

Once the other factors were taken into account, those with health anxiety at the start of the study were 73 per cent more likely to develop heart disease than those who were not in that state of mind, the analysis showed.

“Our research further indicates that characteristic behaviour among persons with health anxiety, such as monitoring and frequent check-ups of symptoms, does not reduce the risk of coronary heart disease events,” the authors conclude.

The research was published in the [BMJ Open.](http://bmjopen.bmj.com/lookup/doi/10.1136/bjopen-2016-012914)