

## Anxiety and Depression Can Make You Sick

*Long-term associations between mental and physical health are examined in a prospective study.*

To address the relationship between health and affective symptoms (anxiety or depression), researchers analyzed data from a British prospective study of 3001 people followed repeatedly since birth in 1946. Follow-up beginning at age 53 involved an average of 14 years of complete data. Case-level symptoms (i.e., suggestive of a diagnosis) of anxiety or depression were defined as the highest 16th percentile of rating-scale scores, based on U.K. population estimates.

Risks for death were significantly elevated during follow-up among people with case-level symptoms. If symptoms were found once, risk was increased 76%; if found twice or 3 to 4 times, risks were increased 87% and 134%, respectively, although these last two associations were no longer significant after adjustment for variables including health indicators (e.g., cardiovascular conditions, smoking, diet, exercise). Such individuals were not more likely to die of suicide or accidents than medical illness. Affective symptoms beginning after age 53 were associated with greater risk for death but only during the following 4 years. Affective symptoms in adolescence were associated with heightened mortality risk only in adulthood.

### COMMENT

It remains unclear whether significant symptoms of anxiety or depression are markers of medical risk or have physiologic or behavioral-health consequences. In either case, clinicians should evaluate anxious and depressed patients carefully for medical comorbidity, especially if symptoms are chronic. As potentially fatal illnesses might develop within a few years of later-onset affective symptoms, treating such symptoms early and vigorously and delivering very close medical follow-up could reduce later morbidity and mortality. The same medical benefit might not accrue to treatment of early-onset affective symptoms, which convey continued risk even after they remit. — **Steven Dubovsky, MD**

Dr. Dubovsky is Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychiatry at the University at Buffalo, SUNY.

*Archer G et al. Association between lifetime affective symptoms and premature mortality. JAMA Psychiatry 2020 Apr 8; [e-pub]. (<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2020.0316>)*