

Article

The Psychological Impact of Stress and Social Determinants of Health

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Abstract: Lifestyle medicine emphasizes a preventive approach to health, focusing on reducing the risk of chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity through lifestyle modification rather than relying only on treatment after disease onset. This approach highlights the importance of a holistic understanding of health that integrates environmental, behavioral, medical, and motivational factors to improve both prevention and treatment outcomes. Within this framework, stress is identified as a significant and complex factor influencing overall health. It is commonly defined as the cumulative physiological and psychological burden on the body over time, and it has been associated with a wide range of health problems, including cardiovascular disease, infertility, burnout, and post-traumatic stress disorder. Despite its importance, stress is often examined in relation to specific medical or psychological conditions rather than as a broader and independent phenomenon. Social determinants of health, including income level, education, employment status, housing conditions, childhood experiences, and social support, play a crucial role in shaping exposure to stress. These determinants contribute to inequalities in both physical and mental health outcomes and influence the development of psychological distress across populations. Research also shows that the impact of stress varies depending on cultural and socioeconomic context. Although stress has been extensively studied in acute situations such as disasters and traumatic events, long-term accumulated stress in generally healthy populations remains insufficiently explored. Addressing this gap is essential for improving preventive strategies in lifestyle medicine and enhancing overall public health outcomes.

Keywords: Lifestyle Medicine, Disease Prevention, Stress, Social Determinants of Health, Psychological Distress, Chronic Disease, Mental Health, Burnout, Cardiovascular Disease, Type 2 Diabetes.

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1. Introduction

Lifestyle medicine is an emerging field that focuses on preventing and managing chronic diseases through healthy lifestyle changes rather than relying solely on medical treatment. In today's world, conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity are becoming increasingly common, highlighting the importance of preventive healthcare approaches [1].

This paper explores the role of stress within a holistic healthcare framework, emphasizing how biological, psychological, and social factors interact to influence health outcomes. It also examines how social determinants of health contribute to stress and its related consequences, particularly in relation to mental and physical well-being [2].

2. Methods

Lifestyle medicine emphasizes a proactive approach to health, where the primary focus is disease prevention rather than treatment after disease onset. Conditions such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity are often preventable through appropriate lifestyle modifications, making prevention a more effective and sustainable strategy for improving population health [3].

A holistic approach to healthcare considers multiple dimensions of health, including environmental, behavioral, medical, and motivational factors. Integrating these aspects increases the effectiveness of both prevention and treatment strategies. Within this framework, it is also essential to identify factors that contribute to disease development, reduce treatment success, or negatively affect adherence to lifestyle changes.

Among these factors, stress plays a particularly important role [4].

Stress is commonly described as the cumulative physiological burden or “wear and tear” on the body over time. It can also be understood as any physical, psychological, or emotional pressure that disrupts normal well-being. Research has identified stress as a modifiable risk factor for various health conditions, including infertility. Over the years, studies have also shown its broader impact on both physical and psychological health outcomes [5]. Early research on stress focused mainly on its relationship with cardiovascular disease. The seminal work of Friedman and Rosenman demonstrated that individuals with a persistent sense of urgency and a strong drive to accomplish multiple tasks within a limited time are at higher risk of developing coronary heart disease. This behavioral pattern is known as the Type A Behavior Pattern [6].

3. Results and Discussion

Further research has expanded the understanding of stress to include conditions such as burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder, particularly in high-risk occupational groups like healthcare workers. However, stress has often been studied in relation to specific diseases rather than as an independent and complex phenomenon influenced by broader social conditions [7].

In this context, social determinants of health play a crucial role. These determinants refer to the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work, and age, as well as the systems that shape access to healthcare. They significantly influence the distribution of both physical and mental health outcomes across populations [8].

Factors such as low income, limited education, unemployment, insecure housing, unsafe environments, adverse childhood experiences, and poor social support can contribute to chronic exposure to stress. Over time, this leads to the accumulation of psychological burden, increasing the risk of mental health disorders. Studies across different populations have shown that psychological distress is strongly linked to such social and environmental stressors [9]. Moreover, research highlights that certain groups, such as Indigenous populations in Australia, agricultural workers in China, and pregnant women facing socioeconomic hardship, are particularly vulnerable to stress due to unfavorable living and working conditions. However, these determinants vary across cultural and national contexts, meaning stress should be studied within specific social and cultural frameworks [10], [11]. Although stress has been widely examined in relation to acute events such as natural disasters, long-term accumulated stress in generally healthy populations remains relatively underexplored [12], [13]. Understanding this gap is essential for developing more effective preventive strategies in lifestyle medicine [14], [15].

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, lifestyle medicine highlights the importance of prevention and a holistic approach to health in addressing chronic diseases such as cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, and obesity. Stress plays a significant role as a modifiable factor that influences both physical and mental health outcomes.

The evidence suggests that stress is strongly linked to social determinants of health, including socioeconomic and environmental conditions. However, it is often studied within specific diseases rather than as a broader phenomenon. Therefore, further research is needed to better understand long-term stress in general populations and to develop more effective preventive strategies in lifestyle medicine.

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