More Links Between Stress And Cancer

For example, Norwegian psychiatrists followed over 60,000 people who had participated in a study from 1995 to 1997 to determine risk factors for cancer. The thorough medical evaluation included an anxiety rating test; researchers reported at the May meeting of the American Psychiatric Association that those with high anxiety scores had 25% more malignant and premalignant conditions than controls with low ratings. A review of the literature at the same meeting also revealed an association between psychological stress and an increased incidence of lymphomas and malignant melanomas, both of which have been linked to impaired immune system function.

Increased stress and particularly depression has been associated with malignancies of the female reproductive organs since Galen first attributed such cancers to an excess of black bile 2000 years ago. Several studies over the past 150 years tend to confirm this relationship and further support comes from a recent report showing diminished immune responses in such patients off of antidepressants compared to treated controls. In one survey of low income women receiving family planning services, all subjects completed a stressful life events questionnaire that included such things as divorce, infidelity, psychological and physical violence in the preceding five years. After adjusting for age, HIV infection and number of sexual partners, increased psychosocial stress was found to be significantly higher in the 122 women with precancerous lesions compared to 160 controls with normal cytology.

Increased stress was also associated with poorer outcomes in a study that tracked women for seven years following the initial diagnosis of stage 2 breast cancer that had not spread beyond regional lymph nodes. All participants filled out detailed questionnaires about various stressors in their lives and when they were experienced. It was found that severe stress after the malignancy had been diagnosed had no relation to recurrence or death. In contrast, major troubles like divorce or death of a loved one in the year prior to diagnosis nearly tripled the likelihood of having a recurrence or dying from breast cancer.

Similar conclusions were reached in a study of over 10,000 female twins born in Finland who were followed from 1982-1996. Participants completed a baseline health questionnaire in 1975 designed to assess known breast cancer risk factors along with individual life events and stressors and this was repeated in 1981 and 1990. Analysis of the 180 cases of breast cancer revealed that increased life event changes and psychological stressors in the five years before the baseline assessment were associated with a significantly increased risk of developing breast cancer compared to cancer-free controls. Another report on 116 newly diagnosed women with breast cancer also found that those with the highest stress levels had a much greater decrease in three measures of immune system resistance than those with low stress. In addition to direct hormonal effects, stress can increase smoking, use of alcohol and drugs or cause sleep problems, all of which can impair immune function.

Stress and lack of social support can also increase risk for developing prostate cancer. Researchers found that men with high levels of stress and lack of satisfying relationships with friends and family had higher blood levels of prostate-specific antigen (PSA), a marker for increased risk of developing prostate cancer. After controlling for age, which increases PSA, the likelihood of having an abnormal PSA test was over three times greater for men with high levels of stress than for controls with low levels (16 percent of high stress men compared with 4.8 percent for low stress men). Similarly, men who were rated low with respect to social support resources were twice as likely to have abnormal PSA tests compared to those deemed to have high levels of support (12.9 percent of low-support men versus 6.8 percent for high-support men).

An Australian judge has just ruled that job stress contributed to the colorectal cancer that killed an officer who had worked at a maximum security prison for over 21 years. His widow claimed that he had been distressed by riots, hostage situations and deaths in custody, was upset about his loss of status in a restructure of positions and had "gone on stress leave" two months before he died.