Partners of ICU Patients More Likely to Be Hospitalized for Heart Problems

Heart attacks, chest pain and stroke are just a few cardiovascular events these spouses face.

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Spouses with a husband or wife in the intensive care unit (ICU) routinely experience extreme stress and worry. What's more, such medical emergencies can also raise these individuals' risk of having a heart attack or other cardiovascular event that require hospitalization, suggest findings from a study published in the American Heart Association's journal Circulation.

For the study, researchers matched more than 7,800 spouses of patients admitted to the ICU for more than two days with 31,000 randomly selected people from a Japanese medical database of 6 million inpatient and outpatient health insurance claims.

Scientists reviewed claims submitted between January 2005 and August 2018 and matched participants for sex, age and medical insurance. On average, spouses were age 54, and 35% were men.

Results showed that couples with a husband or wife in the ICU were more likely to experience chest pain, heart attack, stroke, heart failure and other cardiovascular illnesses compared with those who did not have a spouse in the ICU. In addition, these partners were also at greater risk for hospitalization for heart disease and severe cardiac events.

"Spouses of ICU patients should pay attention to their own physical health, especially in terms of cardiovascular disease," said Hiroyuki Ohbe, MD, MPH, a student in the School of Public Health at the University of Tokyo and the study's senior author. "The ICU can be a stressful environment with significant caregiving burdens, and spouses may face tough decisions about continuing or ending life-sustaining treatment."

Researchers observed that previous inquiries about this issue concentrated on the mental health—not the physical health—of family members of patients in the ICU. Now, however, scientists stress that additional research is needed to confirm this study's findings as well as to ascertain whether circumstances such as social ties, living arrangements, eating habits and other factors affect spouses' heart health during this stressful time.

For related coverage, read "Black Cardiac Patients More Likely to Die" and "Almost Half of

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