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The role of menopausal symptoms on future health and longevity: A systematic scoping review of longitudinal evidence.

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BACKGROUND

Menopausal symptoms are often dismissed as a temporary inconvenience and not taken seriously. However, there is growing evidence that these symptoms can have long-term health consequences for women. A recent systematic review looked at this question and examined the potential effects.

SUMMARY

The review included 53 trials involving more than 450,000 peri- and post-menopausal women. The participants had menopausal symptoms at the start of the study, at an average age of 55 years, and were otherwise healthy. About 70% of the trials were conducted in the US, and many used data from the SWAN trial.

- **Risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD):** Nine trials showed a clear association between vasomotor symptoms (VMS) and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease (CVD). In addition, another study showed that depressive symptoms increased the risk of CVD to a similar extent as high BMI or high systolic blood pressure.
- **Cognitive function:** Seven studies showed that the menopausal transition in particular is associated with an increased prevalence of cognitive symptoms. However, the evidence on the persistence of these symptoms after the menopause is mixed. Women with low socioeconomic status (low income, low education, higher rates of mental illness and substance abuse) are at increased risk of persistent cognitive symptoms. While weight gain, insomnia, depression and anxiety have been shown to affect future cognitive function, this has not been clearly demonstrated for VMS. The link between cognitive symptoms in menopause and an increased risk of dementia remains unclear.
- **Breast cancer:** Weight gain before the menopause increases the risk of breast cancer, while weight loss between the age of 30 and the menopause may reduce the risk. According to the WHI study, at least 10 years of VMS may increase breast cancer risk.
- **Mental health:** Menopausal symptoms, especially VMS, are associated with an increased risk of mental illness. Women with a history of depression are at increased risk of depressive episodes during peri- and postmenopause. Women who do not have a history of depression, but who experience depressive symptoms during the peri-menopausal period, usually experience a reduction in symptoms during the post-menopausal period.
- **Other health risks:** Some studies suggest an association between VMS and an increased risk of diabetes mellitus and osteoporosis.

COMMENTARY

Although some of the symptoms reported in the trials may be due to the ageing process and/or comorbidities, the results clearly show that menopausal symptoms are more than just mood disorders. Rather, they should be considered as a potential risk factor for chronic non-communicable diseases. This is particularly true for cognitive disorders, for which prevention and early detection are the only effective interventions. Seven studies showed that the menopausal transition in particular is associated with an increased prevalence of cognitive symptoms. However, the evidence on the persistence of these symptoms after the menopause is mixed. Women with low socioeconomic status (low income, low education, higher rates of mental illness and substance abuse) are at increased risk of persistent cognitive symptoms.