Smoking and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese Elderly in HK

Background
Depression is an increasingly prevalent public health problem. With significant increase in aging population, mental health of elderly should be an area of concern.

The Department of Community Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, the University of Hong Kong and the Department of Health have jointly conducted a research on “Smoking and Depressive Symptoms in Chinese Elderly in Hong Kong” to investigate the association between elderly smoking and depression. The research results showed that elderly current smokers were about 50% more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms than never smokers, while male current smokers had 62% higher risk.

The new research findings have been published in the international medical journal – Acta Psychiatrica Scandinavica.

Research Methods
This cross-sectional study included all 56,167 elderly aged 65 or over, who first voluntarily enrolled in one of 18 Elderly Health Centres of Department of Health from July 1998 to December 2000. Among the subjects 37,416 (66.7%) were women. Depressive symptoms were measured using the Chinese version of the 15-item Geriatric Depression Scale (GDS). Other information collected included respondents’ lifestyle habits and health conditions etc..

Research Findings
It was found that men were significantly more likely than women to be current smokers and former smokers. Among the subjects 3,800 male (20.3%) and 1,506 female (4.0%) were current smokers, who had ever smoked an average of at least one cigarette a day for at least 1 year. There were a total of 7,657 (40.8%) male and 2,956 female (7.9%) former smokers who had quit smoking for at least 1 year. Others were non-smokers. The number of cigarettes consumed daily was more in male than female elderly current smokers. 44.3% male elderly current smokers consumed 10-20 cigarettes daily and 16.3% even consumed more than 20 cigarettes per day. 66.4% of female elderly current smokers consumed 1-9 cigarettes daily and 5.7% consumed more than 20 cigarettes per day.
The research results showed that:
- elderly current smokers were about 50% more likely to suffer from depressive symptoms than never elderly smokers;
- former elderly smokers were about 20% more likely to be depressed compared with never elderly smokers, but they were 20% less likely to have depressive symptoms than current elderly smokers;
- male current elderly smokers had 60% higher risk to have depressive symptoms, whereas women had about 40% higher risk. Male elderly smokers had a positive linear trend between daily cigarette consumption and depressive symptoms.

**Discussion & Suggestions**
The elderly smokers have higher risk to suffer from depressive symptoms than never smokers, and it is more significant for male than female. Investigators believe nicotine might predispose to depression via its effect on neurotransmission pathways implicated in affect disorders. Another explanation is that elderly with depression might use nicotine to medicate their depressive symptoms.

Investigators further point out that as depression becomes more common, healthcare workers should be vigilant about the detection of depressive symptoms in elderly smokers. It is also suggested depressed smokers should seek proper ways to relieve the symptoms and to seek help from the professionals when needed, and should quit smoking immediately. Cigarette smoking is detrimental not only to their physical health but also to their mental health.


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