

Poor mental health linked to rising rates of chronic disease

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New research led by researchers from The University of Western Australia suggests that poor mental health may be behind an increase in chronic disease in Australia.

The study, published in *Social Science & Medicine*, established strong associations between poor mental health and health behaviour and found that [psychological distress](#) caused unhealthy lifestyle behaviour in men.

Lead author Dan Hoang, who completed the study during his Honours year at UWA's School of Population and Global Health, said the researchers found that unhealthy behaviour such as poor diet, smoking, binge drinking and lack of exercise, which contribute to chronic diseases, was a direct result of psychological distress, particularly in men.

The study used data from the nationally representative [Household, Income and Labour Dynamics Australia Survey](#), for the years 2007 to 2013. In particular, the research looked at how an individual's Kessler 10 score – a measure of one's psychological distress – impacts the likelihood of a person having a [poor diet](#) or unhealthy lifestyle.

"Previous studies suggest that poor mental health is related to having poor lifestyle habits and our study has confirmed that large effects exist for men and women," Mr Hoang said.

"However, what is of particular interest is what actually causes someone to develop poor health habits.

"Our research set out to explore whether a causal link from mental health to [health behaviour](#) existed. We found that poor mental health indeed caused people to participate in common behaviour that led to preventable chronic disease, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

"For women however, a causal link was less clear. Our data suggests that causality may be cyclical for women – that is, poor mental health causes poor health habits, which in turn worsens [poor mental health](#) and so on."

Co-author Dr. Ian Li said policy focused on encouraging people to quit smoking, reduce alcohol consumption, exercise regularly and eat a balanced diet was a valid method of reducing the burden of [chronic diseases](#) on the healthcare sector and the economy.

"However, now that another root cause of such behaviour have been found, it is necessary to include a policy response to reducing psychological distress as part of the plan to tackle chronic disease," Dr. Li said.

Mr Hoang said increasing awareness and destigmatising mental health issues among clinicians, friends and family members could help not only improve the [mental health](#) of an individual, but may also lessen the likelihood of them acquiring a chronic disease.

More information: Dan Hoang et al. All in the mind? Estimating the effect of mental health on

health behaviours, *Social Science & Medicine*
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