Frequent Nightmares Predict Cognitive Decline and Dementia, UK Study Shows

HELSINKI, FINLAND, June 29, 2024 /EINPresswire.com/ -- Middle-aged and older adults who frequently experience distressing dreams may be more at risk of developing cognitive decline and dementia, according to work that will be presented on Saturday, 29 June at EAN 2024, the 10th Congress of the European Academy of Neurology (EAN) in Helsinki, Finland.

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> *Dr Abidemi Otaiku*

Researchers from Imperial College London in the UK investigated the association between self-reported distressing dream frequency and the risk of cognitive decline and incident dementia in men and women in the general population.

The team assessed distressing dream frequency using data collected in middle-aged adults from the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study, and in 2,600 older adults from the Osteoporotic Fractures in Men Study (MrOS) and the Study of Osteoporotic Fractures (SOF).

Compared with middle-aged adults who reported having no distressing dreams at baseline, those who reported having weekly distressing dreams had a four-fold risk of experiencing cognitive decline. Among older adults, the difference in dementia risk was 2.2 times higher.

"Distressing dreams predict cognitive decline and all-cause dementia in middle-aged and older adults in the general population," said Dr Abidemi Otaiku, a neurologist at Imperial College London and the main author of the study, which is the first to explore the interplay between bad dreams and dementia.

Don't Leave Bad Dreams Untreated
While stress, anxiety or depression can cause distressing dreams, other factors such as frightening content in movies or a person's genetics may trigger distressing dreams.

"Recent research has shown that some people have a set of genes that makes them prone to nightmares," Otaiku said. "Other studies show that people who have parents who have nightmares are more likely to have them too."

The relationship between nightmares and brain conditions such as Parkinson's disease has

already been established in the literature, but it may also help predict autoimmune diseases such as lupus, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in childhood. These associations should therefore come under close scrutiny, he explained.

“Nightmares have a very strong link with many brain and other conditions, and I strongly believe that nightmares should be asked about more often by physicians,” he said.

If the cause is psychological, appropriate treatment to better treat one’s stress levels should be sought, either through lifestyle changes, psychotherapy, or medication.

For nightmares with no obvious cause that impair life quality, image rehearsal therapy right before bedtime can be useful.

“Think of a bad dream you regularly have, and, before you go to bed, think about how you can change the ending. For example, if you think you’re being chased and eaten by a tiger, change the end to the tiger giving you a hug. You can even write it down and rehearse that image in your head before you go to bed,” Otaiku suggested.

Five per cent of the general population have nightmares that could be cast as a nightmare disorder. If they really impact life quality, people should not hesitate to check with a physician.

“Don’t leave your nightmares untreated and talk to your GP about it,” he concluded.

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Notes to Editors:

This press release is about the Oral Presentation ‘Distressing dreams, cognitive decline, and risk of dementia: A prospective study of three population-based cohorts’ presented at EAN 2024

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About the Experts:
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