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Health anxiety among older people:
A study of health anxiety and safety behaviours in a
cohort of older adults.

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Abstract

There is a pervasive stereotype that characterises older people as excessively anxious about their health; however, there is little research into this phenomenon. The present study examined three aspects of the subject. Firstly, the study considered whether a cohort of older adults was unduly health anxious. Secondly, determined which demographic and health factors contributed to health anxiety. Lastly, the study examined the relationship between health anxiety and safety behaviours and medical utilisation to determine whether this aspect of the cognitive behavioural model of health anxiety was applicable to older adults.

Participants were a convenience sample of individuals over 65 and living independently in the greater Auckland area. Participants completed an anonymous self report questionnaire measuring demographic factors, physical health and disability, health anxiety, safety behaviours and medical utilisation. 104 women and 41 men completed the survey.

Although a majority of participants reported some physical illness and limitations on physical activity this cohort of adults over 65 was not unduly health anxious. Only increased physical disability and lower education were significant contributors to scores on the health anxiety measure.

Consistent with the cognitive behavioural model of health anxiety; health anxiety was a significant predictor of safety behaviours. Demographic and health factors did not make a significant contribution to this relationship. Health anxiety also predicted medical utilisation, although increased disability was a better predictor.

In spite of stereotypes to the contrary, this cohort of over 65's was not excessively health anxious. Factors that contributed to scores on the health anxiety measure were similar to those found in other studies. The proposition that the cognitive behavioural model of health anxiety may be applicable to older people was supported. The implications of the findings and directions for future research were discussed.

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