Clustering of risk factors and social class in childhood and adulthood in British women's heart and health study: cross sectional analysis

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Abstract

Objective To examine co-occurrence and clustering of risk factors used in the Framingham equation by social class in childhood and adult life.
Design Cross sectional study.
Setting 23 towns across England, Wales, and Scotland.
Participants 2936 women aged 60-79 years.
Main outcome measures Prevalence of risk factors (hypertension, obesity, smoking, left ventricular hypertrophy on electrocardiography, diabetes, and low concentration of high density cholesterol); ratios of observed to expected frequencies of clusters of risk factors.
Results Risk factors were more common in women from manual social classes in either childhood or adult life, and the co-occurrence of three or four of these risk factors was greater among more disadvantaged groups. Within the four socioeconomic groups, these risk factors occurred together more than would be expected from their individual frequency distributions, indicating that they were clustered. The extent of this clustering was similar in all four social class groups.
Conclusions Clustering of risk factors included in the Framingham risk function occurs in all social class groups, but the lack of social patterning makes it unlikely that clustering is an explanation of socioeconomic inequalities in cardiovascular disease. As the proportion of women with co-occurrence of risk factors is greatest in those from manual social class in childhood, this measure of socioeconomic position might prove useful in risk prediction.

Introduction

Measuring the co-occurrence of risk factors to predict risk of coronary heart disease among people without symptoms has gained in popularity with the production of risk factor scoring systems,[1 2] guidelines, and standards of care.[3–5] Early exploration of the multifactorial causes of coronary heart disease showed that risk factors tend to cluster together more than might be expected by the rules of probability.[6 7] For example, if 25% of a population smoke and 30% have hypertension and the two conditions are independent (that is, the occurrence of smoking is not predicted by the occurrence of hypertension), then it would be expected that the percentage who both smoke and are hypertensive would be 25% × 30%—that is, 7.5%. A greater co-occurrence of risk factors than that predicted from probability rules indicates clustering, which may imply an underlying common causal pathway between different risk factors.

We hypothesised that socioeconomic position might be associated with differences in clustering of cardiovascular risk factors. Specifically, we predicted that risk factors measured in adult life would cluster to a greater extent in populations with adverse socioeconomic position. This might provide an explanation for the social inequalities in coronary heart disease that are only partly explained by adjustment for major risk factors.[8] We explored the occurrence and clustering of risk factors for coronary heart disease in a representative sample of older women classified by socioeconomic position in childhood and in adult life.

Methods

Participants

The British women's heart and health study comprises women aged 60-79 years randomly selected from general practitioners' lists in 23 towns across England, Scotland, and Wales. Selection of towns, general practitioners, and participants was based on the methods used for the British regional heart study in men.[9] A total of 4286 women (60% of those invited) participated, and baseline data were collected between April 1999 and March 2001. Participants completed a questionnaire and attended a local health centre, where they were interviewed by a research nurse, were physically examined, and gave a blood sample. General practitioners' medical records were also reviewed for each participant, and details of diagnoses of cardiovascular disease, diabetes and cancer extracted. Full methodological details have been published previously.[10] We excluded participants with previous evidence of cardiovascular disease (doctor's diagnoses of coronary heart disease, stroke, peripheral vascular disease, angina) from the main analyses presented here.

Social class and risk factor measurements

We derived adult social class from the longest held occupation of the participant's husband for married women and her own for single women and childhood social class from the longest held occupation of the participant's father. Social class in childhood and adulthood was categorised into non-manual (social classes I to III non-manual) and manual (III manual to V) according to the registrar general's occupational classification.[11]

We considered risk factors included in the Framingham risk equations (total cholesterol and high density lipoprotein cholesterol concentrations, blood pressure, height, weight, obesity, smoking, low concentration of high density lipoprotein cholesterol, diabetes, left ventricular hypertrophy).[1] Blood samples were taken after women had fasted for six hours. We considered women to have hypertension if they had systolic blood pressure ≥160 mm Hg or diastolic

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BMJ 2004;328:861–4

ELPS *This is the abridged version of an article that was posted on bmj.com on 8 March 2004: http://bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.38034.702836.55*

Table 1 Prevalence (95% confidence interval) of each risk factor, adjusted for age, by social class group among women with no evidence of cardiovascular disease

		Adulthood non-manual		Adulthood manual			
	All participants	Childhood non-manual	Childhood manual	Childhood non-manual	Childhood manual	χ^2 df=3	P value*
Smoking, current	10.3 (8.9 to 11.9)	7.2 (5.4 to 9.6)	9.9 (8.0 to 12.2)	7.2 (4.6 to 11.3)	12.6 (10.1 to 15.5)	13.8	0.003
Hypertension (≥160 or ≥90 mm Hg or on medication)	44.9 (42.7 to 47.1)	38.2 (33.8 to 42.7)	46.7 (43.5 to 50)	45.3 (38.8 to 51.9)	45.6 (42.4 to 48.9)	5.0	0.173
Low HDLC ≤0.9 mmol/l	2.4 (1.7 to 3.6)	2.4 (1.3 to 4.5)	2.2 (1.4 to 3.5)	1 (0.1 to 6.7)	2.9 (1.9 to 4.4)	2.9	0.406
Obese (BMI >30 kg/m^2)	24.3 (22.1 to 26.6)	15.2 (12.6 to 18.3)	24 (20.6 to 27.6)	23.2 (18.5 to 28.7	28.6 (25.9 to 31.4)	24.5	<0.001
Diabetes (diagnosed or fasting glucose ≥7 mmol/l)	7.5 (6.7 to 8.3)	4.9 (3.3 to 7.2)	8.1 (6.3 to 10.3)	6 (3.7 to 9.5)	8.3 (6.9 to 9.9)	6.7	0.083
LVH (Minnesota code definite/probable)	8.2 (7.3 to 9.3)	7.3 (5.1 to 10.3)	8.2 (6.4 to 10.5)	7.2 (4.1 to 12.4)	8.7 (7.5 to 10)	1.0	0.790

HDLC=high density lipoprotein cholesterol, LVH=left ventricular hypertrophy.
*For difference between social class groups.

blood pressure ≥95 mm Hg or were taking blood pressure medication.

Statistical analysis

We classified women into four socioeconomic groups: childhood non-manual/adult non-manual, childhood manual/adult non-manual, childhood non-manual/adult manual, childhood manual/adult manual. The prevalence of each risk factor was tabulated for each of the four groups with adjustment for age and town effects. We derived expected frequencies of co-occurrence of risk factors from the prevalences of each risk factor within each socioeconomic group. Then we estimated observed to expected ratios for all participants and separately for each of the four socioeconomic groups. Clustering is suggested by observed:expected ratios that are high for no risk factors, low for a single risk factor, and high for three or more factors. We used χ^2 statistics to test the significance of the overall distribution of expected and observed counts within each social class group.

Results

Of the 4286 participants, 2936 provided data on both childhood and adult social class and had no diagnosis of myocardial infarction, angina, stroke, or peripheral vascular disease at baseline survey. Of the 2936 women, 42.4% (1245) were classified as manual social class in both childhood and adulthood, 33.4% (980) were manual in childhood and non-manual in adult life, 16.8% (493) were non-manual at both times, and the remaining 7.4% (218) were non-manual in childhood and manual in adulthood. Table 1 shows the distribution of risk factors for all participants and for the four social class groups. Smoking was more common among those who were in a manual class, compared with a non-manual class, at both times. Similar patterns were seen for obesity, diabetes, and left ventricular hypertrophy, although significant differences between social class groups were apparent only for smoking and obesity. Low concentrations of high density lipoprotein cholesterol were more common in those classified as childhood manual and adult manual. Hypertension showed a similar prevalence in all groups, but was lower in women in non-manual classes at both times. In general, those with manual social class at either childhood or adulthood had more risk factors than those who were non-manual at both times.

Table 2 shows the expected and observed frequencies of the number of risk factors experienced, broken down by social class groups and for the whole sample. None of the participants had five or six risk factors. In women in non-manual classes at both times, 47.7% had no risk factors compared with 31.6% of those in manual social classes at both times. More women with manual social class in childhood had three or four risk factors (childhood manual/adulthood non-manual 7.2%; childhood manual/adulthood manual 7.3%). Within all four socioeconomic groups risk factors for cardiovascular disease clustered, with a greater than expected number of women with no risk factors in all four groups, a lower than expected number with just one isolated risk factor, and a greater than expected number with three and four risk factors in all four groups. The pattern of clustering was similar in all four social class groups, strongly suggesting that there is no difference in clustering between them.

Discussion

People who are obese, smoke, and have hypertension and hypercholesterolaemia might be considered

Table 2 Expected (Exp) and observed (Obs) frequencies (%) of clusters of risk factors by social class group among women with no evidence of cardiovascular disease.

				Adulthood non-manual						Adulthood manual					
No of risk factors*	All participants (n=2626)			Childhood non-manual (n=451)			Childhood manual (n=888)			Childhood non-manual (n=187)			Childhood manual (n=1100)		
	Exp	Obs	O:E	Exp	Obs	O:E	Exp	Obs	O:E	Exp	Obs	O:E	Exp	Obs	O:E
0	30.9	36.1	116.9	41.2	47.7	115.6	30.0	35.5	118.3	33.5	38.0	113.2	27.5	31.6	114.8
1	44.8	38.1	85.1	43.3	33.5	77.3	45.2	38.2	84.5	45.7	40.6	88.9	44.1	39.5	89.5
2	20.2	19.3	95.6	13.5	14.9	110.1	20.6	19.1	93.0	17.9	16.6	92.8	22.9	21.7	94.9
3 or 4	4.2	6.5	156.7	1.9	4.0	205.7	4.2	7.2	170.3	2.9	4.8	167.7	5.5	7.3	132.0
χ^2, df=3	85.5, P<0.0001			25.0, P<0.0001			38.0, P<0.0001			4.8, P=0.12			18.9, P<0.002		

*No women had either five or six risk factors, those with three or four risk factors were combined because of small numbers.
O:E=observed to expected ratio.

common high risk stereotypical patients who require multiple risk factor intervention. While it may seem self evident that such risk factors cluster in individuals, we have shown that the occurrence of such clustering is uncommon, with only 4-7% of older women exposed to three or more risk factors. We had hypothesised that clustering would have been more marked in women who had experienced greater social disadvantage throughout their lives, as exposures in early life may set in train adverse risk factor profiles with a similar underlying pathophysiological process resulting in clustering of risk factors in adult life. Although risk factors were more common in women from manual social classes in either childhood or adult life, they showed broadly similar patterns of clustering in all four social class groups. Thus, our main hypothesis was not supported.

Clustering of risk factors

There was a weak correlation between the risk factors we looked at (see table on bmj.com) but that does not mean that they are clustered. The appropriate analysis is to compare the expected with the observed distribution of risk factors, assuming that the risk factors are statistically independent of each other. Our analysis has simplified the underlying nature of the data by dichotomising the continuous variables and then modeling all risk factors as binary. The threshold used to define high risk may influence the degree of clustering found, as shown in an earlier study in which higher thresholds (90th centile) were associated with greater clustering.[6] We used thresholds previously determined by their clinical use in risk scoring, and, despite these being considerably lower than the 90th centile, clustering was still evident.

Clustering and occurrence of cardiovascular disease

The importance of clustering is that the associations with cardiovascular disease tend to be greater than expected.[6] Recent findings from the large study on atherosclerosis risk in communities have shown that of the 57 combinations of six components of insulin resistance syndrome, those with all six components have the largest excess carotid artery intimal-medial thickness, and these associations are synergistic.[12]

Study limitations

Our response rate (60%) was moderate but consistent with other large epidemiological surveys, including the health survey for England, in which participants were visited in their own homes.[13] Distributions of cardiovascular risk factors in women in our study are similar to those for older women in the health survey for England. The social class distribution of the women in our study is similar to that found in the 1991 census (52% in manual social class in our study *v* 55% older adults in the 1991 census). Responders were younger and less likely to have diabetes and stroke but had similar prevalences of coronary heart disease and cancer to non-responders. Our cohort may therefore have been healthier, but this would bias the associations observed only if they were in a different direction or markedly different in the non-responders, which seems unlikely.

Women without social class data were more likely to have fathers or husbands, or both, who were long term unemployed, and they were more likely to smoke. If we had included them the degree of clustering observed might have been increased, making our estimates conservative. Finally, most of the women examined were of white ethnic background (99.6%) and possibly risk factors may cluster in socially determined patterns more in men and ethnic minority groups than in white British women. Replication of these analyses in men and in ethnic minority groups would be of interest.

Implications

Clustering of risk factors—in distinction to the co-occurrence of risk factors—implies that they are not independent of each other and may therefore reflect an underlying causal or pathogenetic mechanism. The clustering we observed was similar in each social class group and, unlike the clustering observed in insulin resistance syndrome,[14] does not seem to be particularly associated with causal mechanisms operating in childhood. The lack of any social class patterning of clustering observed here suggests that, for these risk factors at least, greater clustering in socially disadvantaged women is not a plausible explanation for social inequalities in women's risk for coronary heart disease.

Simply including socioeconomic position into risk factor scoring systems would be an effective means of identifying population subgroups in whom co-occurrence of risk factors is more likely to occur and in whom need for treatment is greater.

What is already known on this topic

Manual childhood social class, independently of adult social class, is associated with increased risk of coronary heart disease

Risk factors for coronary heart disease tend to cluster—that is they co-occur more commonly than independence would predict—and have synergistic effects in increasing risk

The co-occurrence of risk factors is now widely used to predict individual risk of coronary heart disease by means of risk factor scoring methods

What this study adds

The magnitude of co-occurrence of three or more risk factors included in the Framingham equation is more common among women in manual childhood social classes, and upward social mobility does not reduce this exposure level

Risk factors in the Framingham equation cluster, with more women than expected exposed to none or three or four risk factors and fewer exposed to a single risk factor; clustering of three or more risk factors is not common

Clustering is not socially patterned and cannot explain social inequalities in risk for coronary heart disease

The British women's heart and health study is codirected by Shah Ebrahim, Peter Whincup, and Goya Wannamethee. We thank Rita Patel, Carol Bedford, Alison Emerton, Nicola Frecknall, Karen Jones, Mark Taylor, and Katherine Wornell for

collecting and entering data; all of the general practitioners and their staff who have supported data collection; and the women who have participated in the study. We thank Margaret May for advice on statistical methods and George Davey Smith for comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript.

Contributors: See bmj.com

Funding: The British women's heart and health study is funded by the Department of Health and the British Heart Foundation. DAL is funded by a Medical Research Council/Department of Health training fellowship.

Conflict of interests: None declared.

Ethical approval: Not required.

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(Accepted 14 January 2004)

doi 10.1136/bmj.38034.702836.55

Doctors' communication of trust, care, and respect in breast cancer: qualitative study

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BMJ 2004;328:864–7

Abstract

Objective To determine how patients with breast cancer want their doctors to communicate with them.
Design Qualitative study.
Setting Breast unit and patients' homes.
Participants 39 women with breast cancer.
Main outcome measure Patients' reports of doctors' characteristics or behaviour that they valued or deprecated.
Results Patients were not primarily concerned with doctors' communication skills. Instead they emphasised doctors' enduring characteristics. Specifically, they valued doctors whom they believed were technically expert, had formed individual relationships with them, and respected them. They therefore valued forms of communication that are currently not emphasised in training and research and did not intrinsically value others that are currently thought important, including provision of information and choice.
Conclusions Women with breast cancer seek to regard their doctors as attachment figures who will care for them. They seek communication that does not compromise this view and that enhances confidence that they are cared for. Testing and elaborating our analysis will help to focus communication research and teaching on what patients need rather than on what professionals think they need.

Introduction

Doctors often communicate poorly with patients who have cancer, and patients do not receive the help they need to understand treatment options.[1 2] Communication skills can be enhanced by training, which improves patients' satisfaction and wellbeing.[3 4] Enhanced communication skills do not always, however, improve patients' experience.[5]

Clinicians are encouraged to provide as much information as possible, to offer choice, and to discuss emotional issues, and extensive research assesses how well they do.[6] Yet professionals' and patients' views as to what is good communication about cancer can diverge, and patients' satisfaction with a consultation is not always related to observer ratings of the formal quality of clinicians' communication.[5 7 8] We examined clinicians' communication according to how patients experienced it.

Methods

We selected women with primary breast cancer consecutively from surgery and oncology clinics to include a range of stages in treatment.

The researcher asked eligible patients for consent to a study of what is important to them about doctors' communication. By grounding interviews in recent

ELPS *This is the abridged version of an article that was posted on bmj.com on 30 March 2004: http://bmj.com/cgi/doi/10.1136/bmj.38046.771308.7C*