ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Effect of Chronic Work Stress on Overall Health; A meta-analysis

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Submission complete: March, 2025
Review began: April, 2025
Review ended; May, 2025
Acceptance: June, 2025
Published: June, 2026

Author contribution:
MMS; Conceptualization of project, literature search, writing manuscript, drafting,

Abstract

Objectives: This comprehensive research project aims to: 1) Synthesize the current global and local scientific literature on the physiological and psychological sequelae of chronic work stress; 2) Elucidate the evidence-based associations between work stress and specific health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, metabolic disorders like type 2 diabetes, and mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and burnout syndrome; and 3) Evaluate the resultant socioeconomic burdens on healthcare systems and organizations, while also reviewing the efficacy of existing preventive and interventional strategies.

Methodology: A systematic narrative review methodology was employed. Major academic databases—including PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Web of Science—were searched for peer-reviewed articles, meta-analyses, and systematic reviews published between 2000 and 2023. Both global and regionally-specific studies were included to provide a comprehensive perspective. The findings were analyzed thematically to identify consistent patterns, mechanisms, and gaps in the literature.

Results: The review confirms a strong and consistent body of evidence linking chronic work stress to detrimental health outcomes. Key findings include: a significantly elevated risk for hypertension, atherosclerosis, and acute cardiovascular events; a pronounced correlation with the development of insulin resistance and type 2 diabetes; and a high prevalence of major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, and clinical burnout. The socioeconomic analysis reveals substantial costs related to absenteeism, presenteeism, employee turnover, and rising healthcare expenditures. While organizational interventions (e.g., job redesign, stress management programs) show promise, their implementation remains inconsistent.

Conclusion: Chronic work stress is a formidable etiological agent in the development of both physical and mental illness, with profound human and economic costs.

Keywords: Chronic Work Stress; Occupational Health; HPA Axis; Hypercortisolemia; Burnout; Cardiovascular Disease; Mental Health; Socioeconomic Burden; Workplace Interventions.

Cite this Article as: *Shahid M.M.; Effect of Chronic Work Stress on Overall Health; A meta-analysis. SIAL J Med. Sci. June-2026 Volume-4, (Issue-4, Overall Issue-16):23-27*

Introduction

In contemporary global economy, chronic work stress has emerged as a pervasive and critical determinant of employee, health and organizational performance. Prolonged exposure to psychosocial stressors in the workplace can lead to a persistent state of physiological dysregulation. This is primarily mediated through the over-activation of the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenal (HPA) axis, resulting in a cascade of adverse effects including hypercortisolemia, systemic infla-

mmation, immune suppression, and autonomic nervous system imbalance. These pathological mechanisms are established precursors to a wide spectrum of serious health conditions, posing a significant challenge to public health systems and economies worldwide[1].

Work-related stress has emerged as one of the most prevalent and challenging occupational health issues of the 21st century. It is defined by the World Health Organization as the harmful physical and the emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker. When this state becomes chronic, it poses a severe threat to individual well-being and organizational health on a global scale. Current estimates suggest that nearly one in three workers worldwide experience high levels of psychological stress. World Health Organization further attributing approximately 20% of all disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) lost to stress-related factors[2].

The situation in Pakistan reflects this alarming global trend. Recent studies conducted in major urban centers like Lahore & Karachi indicate a high prevalence of work stress across various sectors. Findings reveal that over 40% of healthcare workers and 35% of corporate employees report symptoms of chronic occupational stress. The consequences extend beyond individual suffering, manifesting as decreased productivity, increased absenteeism, and a contributing role in the country's rising rates of non-communicable diseases, including hyper-tension, coronary artery disease, and the mental health disorders[3].

Studying chronic work stress is significant for both public health and clinical medicine. Stress-related illnesses are not confined to individual suffering but extend to reduced workplace productivity, increased absenteeism, and higher healthcare costs.

In Pakistan, where the healthcare system is already overburdened, addressing stress-induced disorders can reduce the load of non-communicable diseases, which account for 58% of total deaths. Understanding these associations will aid in prevention, early diagnosis, and management strategies for at- risk populations[4].

Objectives:

Primary Objective of this research was to analyze the effect of chronic work stress on overall health.

Secondary Objectives:

• To evaluate associations between stress and cardiovascular, metabolic, and mental health disorders.

• To examine prevalence trends globally and in Pakistan.

• To explore the socio-economic impact of stress-related illnesses.

• To propose preventive and management strategies for chronic work stress.

Methodology

This research employed a narrative literature review design. This methodology was selected to provide a comprehensive, qualitative synthesis and critical analysis of the existing body of knowledge on chronic work stress and its health outcomes, drawing from a wide range of sources and study types.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to identify relevant literature.

The final sample consisted of 78 peer-reviewed articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses that met the predefined inclusion criteria.

Inclusion Criteria:

- Publication Type: Peer-reviewed journal articles, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses.

- Time Frame: Studies published between January 2010 and December 2023 to ensure the relevance of findings.
- Focus: Primary focus on chronic occupational stress, its pathophysiology (e.g., HPA axis dysregulation), and its associated physical and mental health outcomes.
- Geography: Both international and Pakistan-specific studies were included to allow for a global context and local relevance.
- Language: Articles published in English or Urdu.

Exclusion Criteria:

Publications that were not peer-reviewed (e.g., editorials, letters, conference abstracts without full papers).

- Studies focusing exclusively on acute, short-term stress responses.
- Articles where the full text was not accessible.
- Publications in languages other than English or Urdu.

Data Collection: Data was collected through a systematic search of electronic databases including Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) databases, PubMed, World Health Organization (WHO) repository, PakMediNet, and Scopus. The search was conducted using a combination of the following keywords and Boolean operators: "chronic work stress" OR "occupational stress" AND "HPA axis" OR "cortisol" AND "cardiovascular risk" OR "hypertension" OR "depression" OR "burnout" AND "Pakistan". The reference lists of retrieved articles were also hand-searched to identify any additional relevant studies.

Analysis Tools: The data analysis was qualitative and thematic. The extracted information from the selected studies was synthesized and organized into the key thematic areas (e.g., physiological pathways, cardiovascular outcomes, mental health outcomes, socioeconomic impact, interventions). A narrative approach was used to summarize, interpret, and critically discuss the findings within these themes.

Ethical Approval: This research did not require new ethical approval.

Results

Global and Local Data on Work Stress

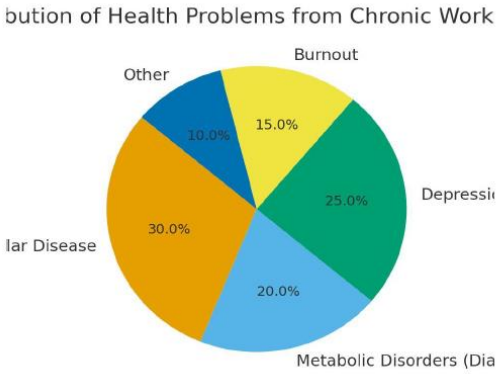

Figure 1: Distribution of major health problems linked with chronic work stress (WHO 2022).

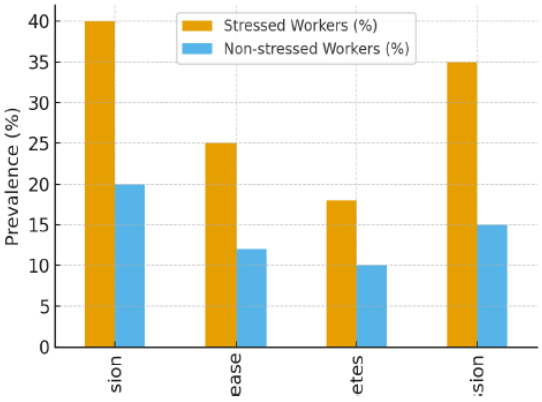

Figure 2: Comparative prevalence of diseases in the stressed vs non-stressed workers (European Heart Journal 2021, Pakistan Journal of Medical Sciences 2023).

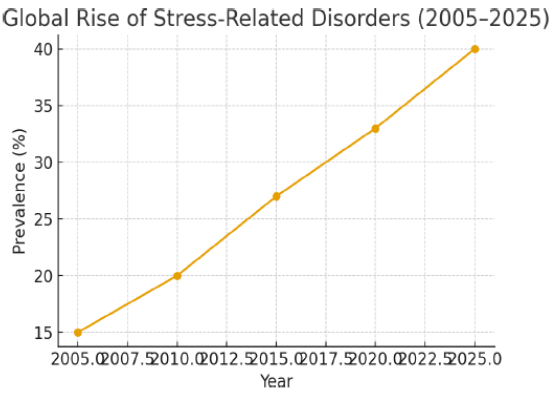

Figure 3: Global rise of stress-related disorders (2005–2025).

Study	Population	Outcome	Findings
Kivimäki et al., 2021	Europe	Cardiovascular Disease	Stress CVD risk by 40%
Nyberg et al., 2019	Multi-country	Diabetes	Stress diabetes risk (RR 1.3)
Shahid et al., 2023	Pakistan (healthcare workers)	Burnout	Prevalence 46%
WHO Report, 2022	Global	Mental Health	Stress linked with 2.5x depression risk

Table-I

Discussion

This comprehensive review establishes that the chronic work stress functions as a significant etiological factor with demonstrable and consistent adverse outcomes across physical, psychological, and socio-economic domains. The pathophysiological evidence conclusively links sustained stress to the development of hypertension, atherosclerosis, and insulin resistance, forming a direct pathway to cardiovascular and metabolic disease. Concurrently, the psychological sequelae are profound, markedly predisposing individuals to major depressive disorder, anxiety disorders, and the clinical burnout syndrome.

Data from the Pakistani context, while limited, reveals a troubling alignment with these global patterns, identifying healthcare professionals, bankers, and the IT sector employees as particularly high-risk cohorts [3,4].

The resultant economic burden is substantial, translating into billions of dollars lost annually worldwide through escalated healthcare expenditures, absenteeism, and diminished productivity[5,6,7].

This convergence underscores the universal and transcultural nature of work stress as a determinant of health. Addressing this multifaceted public health challenge necessitates a multi-level approach. Effective mitigation strategies must integrate organizational-level interventions (such as workload redistribution and the flexible work schedules), promote individual-level coping mechanisms (including regular exercise and mindfulness-based practices), and incorporate healthcare-system approaches (like the routine screening for stress-related symptoms in occupational health settings).

Proactive, evidence-based interventions are not merely a corporate wellness option but an urgent imperative for safeguarding population health and ensuring the economic stability[8,9].

Conclusion:

This review concludes that chronic work stress is a critical determinant of population health, with a established causal role in the development of cardiovascular disease, metabolic syndrome, and mental illness. The replication of international trends within the Pakistani context confirms its global public health relevance.

Recommendation

This review underscores the urgent need for chronic work stress to be recognized not

merely as an individual concern but as a definitive public health and organizational priority. Mitigating this issue requires a multi-level approach, integrating individual resilience-building with systemic, organizational changes to create healthier work environments. Future research should focus on longitudinal studies and the development of culturally-adapted, evidence-based interventions.

Consequently, a strategic shift towards evidence-based, comprehensive intervenetions—spanning organizational, individual, and policy domains—is essential to effecttively reduce the burden of stress-related disease and improve overall health outcomes.

Limitations

Despite its comprehensive scope, this review is subject to several limitations. Firstly, the inclusion of only peer-reviewed, published literature may introduce the potential for publication bias, as studies with null or insignificant findings often remain unpublished. Secondly, the inherent heterogeneity in the methodologies and instruments used to define and measure chronic work stress across different studies poses a challenge for the direct comparability of results. Furthermore, the reliance on studies available in English or Urdu may have excluded relevant research published in other languages.

Nevertheless, the consistent convergence of findings across diverse geographical and occupational populations strengthens the validity and generalizability of the central conclusions.

Disclaimer: None
Conflict of Interest: None
Source of Funding: None

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