

# WOHRC FACT SHEET

WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RESOURCE CENTER



## The Stress of "Women's Work"

Some very interesting news has emerged from recent research on occupational stress. Contrary to popular conception, it is not top-level executives who suffer most from the high demands of their jobs, but low-level, low-status workers who have demanding jobs but little or no control

over them. The fact that most women are still segregated in these kinds of jobs makes them prime targets for stress. The added fact that most women with paid jobs also do a considerable amount of unpaid work at home only tends to increase their stress load.

Women's jobs with the most stress, according to Dr. Robert Karasek of Columbia University, are assembly line worker, waitress, sewing machine operator, nursing aide and office worker — including telephone operator, file clerk, clerk-typist, keypunch operator and video display terminal operator.

Dr. Karasek, a leading researcher of occupational stress, arrived at these conclusions by studying both health statistics — mostly notably those on heart disease — and the characteristics of many occupations. He found the most heart disease in both men and women on assembly lines.

### Low control is decisive

"High demands, low control and a low level of physical exertion are the three major job factors leading to stress-related disease," says Karasek. "But low control is the most decisive of the three."

Karasek's findings are buttressed by those of another internationally known stress researcher, Dr. Marianne Frankenhauser of the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm. By analyzing hormones in the blood and urine of workers under stress, Dr. Frankenhauser can actually tell us what happens in the body to cause disease. Her work concentrates on two types of stress hormones often connected with heart attack and stroke. One type is connected with adrenaline, the hormone that "charges up" the body for fight or flight; the other type is cortisol which is connected with feelings of anxiety.

Working under pressure, she finds, causes the body to produce more of both hormones. Although both may be necessary in emergency situations, their presence in the bloodstream over extended



Clerk-typists' jobs are those ranked among the highest in stress.

periods of time puts too great a strain on the heart and other organs.

### Control decreases cortisol

However, if a worker is given more control over her job, the cortisol level will go down. This is not only healthier, but the worker will actually feel better.

Dr. Frankenhauser induced these feelings in the laboratory by setting up experimental work situations in which one group of workers was forced to perform a job at a set rate of speed, while another group was allowed to adjust the speed to their individual liking. The latter group not only had lower levels of cortisol, but found the work "pleasant and stimulating."

### Boredom is stressful

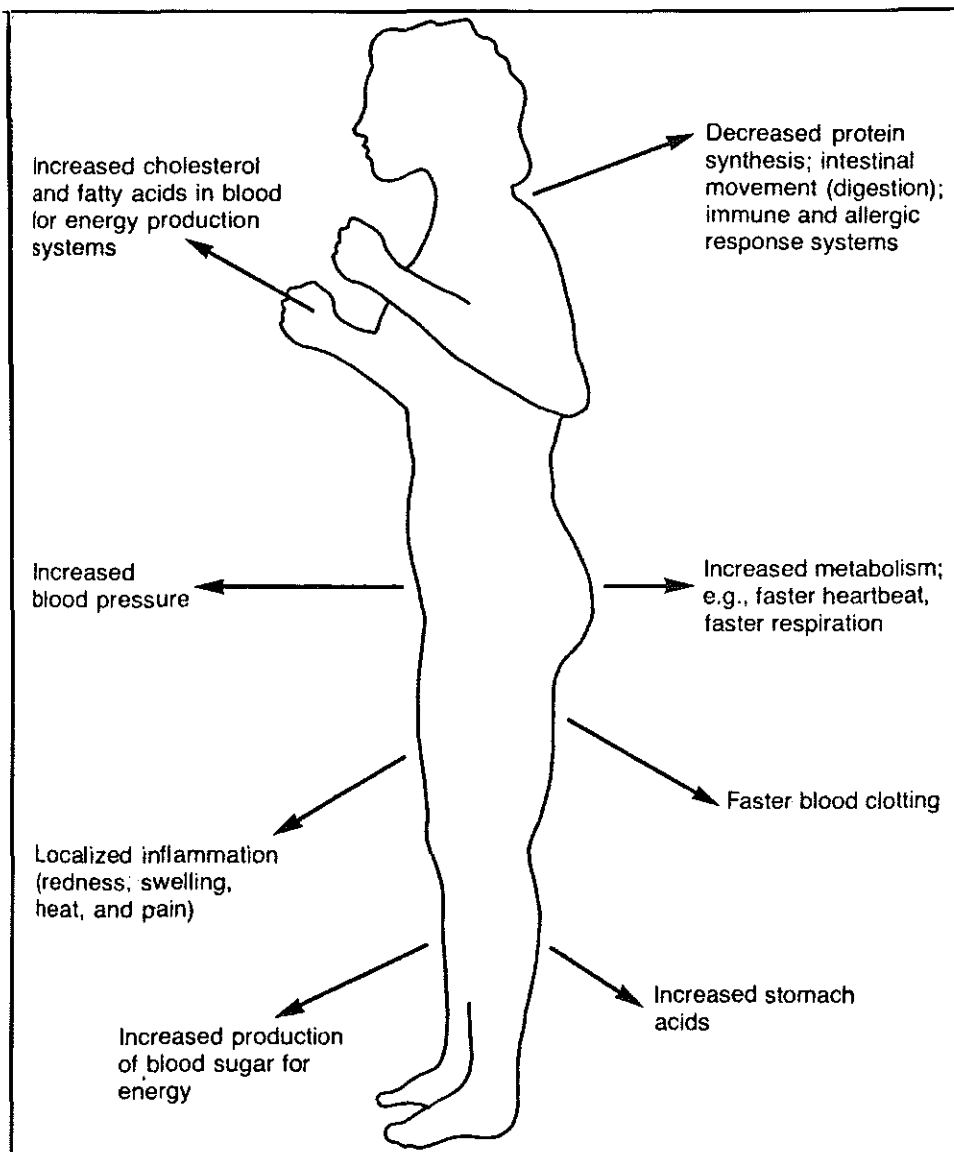
Boredom is another important factor leading to stress, say researchers. The work that many women do is repetitious and monotonous. Women workers are often considered frivolous or "gossipy" when they spice up such jobs by chatting while they work. This, however, is a normal and healthy human reaction to stressful boredom. The worker in a much worse situation is the one whose work pattern prevents her from any kind of socializing on the job. This is the case with many of the new automated office jobs which require high speed and concentration.

Dr. Frankenhauser finds that in extreme cases of boredom the brain processes will actually slow down. The worker will feel alienated, completely uninvolved, almost literally "bored to death."

Surveys done by 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women, come up with similar findings. "The highest rates of total fatigue or exhaustion are associated with the highest reports of monotony on the job," says a 9 to 5 report on health hazards to office workers. "Performing the same set of routines without the chance to learn new skills can lead to boredom, frustration and decline in self-esteem."

### Individual differences

Some people seem to suffer more from stress than others. The fact is that they actually do, although why is not always clear. Researchers tend to say that it depends on the way the person *perceives* the stress: what may be very upsetting to one may not be to another. This may depend on a worker's physiology and personality, her personal and job history and even on the way her family taught her to



Jeanne Stellman, *Women's Work, Women's Health*

**This diagram shows some of the physical and chemical stress responses of the body.**

cope with stress.

### Dual role stress

Whatever the personal differences, however, most women suffer from the stress that comes with having two jobs at once — one inside and one outside their homes. Unwinding after stressful work, say the researchers, is essential for reducing excessive adrenaline levels and the strain they put on the body. A woman who comes home from a stressful job only to face more chores at home has no chance to unwind or relax.

In one study reported by Dr. Frankenhauser, women office workers who were forced by an emergency to work 73-hour weeks for four weeks in a row still showed remarkable amounts of adrenaline in their blood after the work was completed. There was a time lag between the height of

the work emergency and the greatest buildup of stress hormones in their bodies. Thus, the job stress followed them home, where they still reported feeling tired and irritable, while tests showed that their hearts were beating faster than normally.

Yet the average working woman is estimated to spend 30 to 40 hours a week on housework *in addition to* the 40 hours she spends on her paid job. It is easy to see why she is a natural victim of stress.

### Alleviating stress

Individuals and groups can work in a variety of ways to reduce job stress and its effects.

Individual exercise, like jogging and swimming after work, may help reduce the effects of stress, but it is not enough to undo all the harm a really stressful job may cause. In effect, since it doesn't

remove the causes of stress, exercise treats the symptoms, not the "disease."

"Letting off steam" or griping can be healthful. But before you do so, make sure that you do not vent your anger on family members and fellow workers. They probably have stresses of their own and do not need the additional amount your anger may cause them. What is more, they can be valuable allies in your resistance to stress.

Many employees in a single workplace can suffer from the same stressful situations. Instead of snapping at each other, it is far more useful to join forces and try to change the situation.

In some places workers have managed to eliminate loud and irritating noises. Others have worked for better designed workplaces, clearer job descriptions, adequate rest periods and even job rotation, so that monotonous jobs can be alternated with more interesting ones.

In other places, "stress groups" have been formed by workers to give each other support and to find ways of reducing stress. The Labor Institute for Mental Health in Oakland, California, has pioneered in developing these groups with union locals. For more information, call the Institute at (415) 653-6166.

Members of families, too, can work together to relieve stress. When chores are shared the burden on any one person is lightened. The employed mother is not only healthier, but happier, which cannot fail to have an effect on the entire family.

Many women still need to rid themselves of the old compulsion to "do it all by themselves." Husbands and children need to learn that they themselves have something to gain by sharing the housework — a healthier and happier family life.

Occupational health specialists tell us that any kind of individual isolation tends to emphasize stress. People seem to suffer less from it who take part in groups — community, church, trade union, political or cultural. All of these can be valuable stress relievers. □

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