

High debt could be hazardous to your health

15 August 2013, by Erin White

If young people are drowning in debt, their blood pressure may be on the rise and their health could suffer. A new Northwestern Medicine® study has found that high financial debt is associated with higher diastolic blood pressure and poorer self-reported general and mental health in young adults.

The study, published in the August issue of *Social Science and Medicine*, offers a glimpse into the impact [debt](#) may have on the health of young Americans.

"We now live in a debt-fueled economy," said Elizabeth Sweet, lead author of the study. "Since the 1980s American household debt has tripled. It's important to understand the [health consequences](#) associated with debt."

Sweet is an assistant professor of medical social sciences at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine and a faculty associate of Cells to Society (C2S): The Center on Social Disparities and Health, at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern.

Researchers used data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to explore the association between debt and both psychological and general [health outcomes](#) in 8,400 [young adults](#), ages 24 to 32 years old.

Previous studies have found evidence that debt is associated with adverse [psychological health](#), but this is the first to look at physical health as well.

Here are some key findings of the study:

- Twenty percent of participants reported that they would still be in debt if they liquidated all of their assets (high debt-to-asset-ratio).
- Higher debt-to-asset ratio was associated with higher perceived stress and depression, worse self-reported general health and higher [diastolic blood pressure](#).

Those with higher debt were found to have a 1.3 percent increase (relative to the mean) in [diastolic blood](#) pressure—which is clinically significant. A two-point increase in diastolic blood pressure, for example, is associated with a 17 percent higher risk of hypertension and a 15 percent higher risk of stroke.

The researchers found that individuals with high compared to low debt reported higher levels of perceived stress (representing an 11.7 percent increase relative to the mean) and higher depressive symptoms (a 13.2 percent increase relative to the mean).

"You wouldn't necessarily expect to see associations between debt and physical health in people who are so young," Sweet said. "We need to be aware of this association and understand it better. Our study is just a first peek at how debt may impact physical health."

In the study, personal financial debt was measured in two ways. Participants were asked about their debt-to-asset ratio by answering this question: "Suppose you and others in your household were to sell all of your major possessions (including your home), turn all of your investments and other assets into cash, and pay off all of your debts. Would you have something left over, break even or be in debt?"

Second, participants were asked how much debt, besides a home mortgage, they owe. Response categories ranged from "less than \$1,000" to "\$250,000 or more."

Perceived stress, depressive symptoms and general health were measured through a series of questions. Both systolic and diastolic blood pressures were measured on each participant by a field interviewer.

Provided by Northwestern University

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