

HKU survey revealed :

**97% Hong Kong citizens have sub-optimal health
Working adults ignore warning signs at their peril
Impacting Two thirds of the general population**

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Most Hong Kong people are living under great working stress with unhealthy diet. They are being disturbed by bodily symptoms such as headache, dizziness, difficulty concentrating and chronic fatigue etc. As defined by the World Health Organization, health is a “state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.¹” In-between health and illness lies a minefield of sub-health symptoms, such as indigestion, back pain, low mood, sleep disorders and frequent colds.

Sub-health undermines overall health

High levels of workplace stress and unhealthy habits including sleep deprivation, lack of exercise and poor diets are believed to be major contributors to sub-health symptoms². Since the symptoms (Table 1) are less noticeable than those of diseases, they are often ignored. However, overlooking these warning signs increases the risk of developing chronic diseases³.

To investigate the prevalence and impact of sub-health in Hong Kong, the Public Opinion Programme (POP) of The University of Hong Kong (HKU) conducted a random sampling telephone-based community survey in April 2013, interviewing 535 Hong Kong residents aged 18 to 65.

Ms Karie Ka-lai Pang, Assistant Director of HKU’s Public Opinion Programme analyzed and released the key findings of this recent survey as follows:

Key findings I: Prevalence and impact of sub-health in Hong Kong

1. High prevalence of sub-health symptoms in Hong Kong

The vast majority (97%) of the respondents reported having experienced at least one sub-health symptom. The most commonly reported symptoms causing major concern were aching and tired eyes (78%), back pain (73%) and chronic fatigue (73%). Those most affected were aged 30-49, with an average of more than 9 symptoms.

¹ World Health Organisation(2003) ,(WHO definition of Health),URL :<http://www.who.int/about/definition/en/print.html> Accessed on 22 May 2013

² 楊桂英等., 社区人群亚健康状态及其健康教育的研究进展 Chin J Mod Nurs 2009;15:882-884

³ Integrated Chinese and Western Health Management Services. Tung Wah Group of Hospitals. Available at <http://www.tungwah.org.hk/?content=674> Accessed on 8 May 2013

2. Many people believe they are not sick and soldier on

Even though most people experienced sub-health symptoms, and 58% reported discomfort in the last three months, many (57%) still believed that they were in good health and overlooked the body's warning signs.

3. Nearly a quarter had frequently experienced at least three sub-health symptoms in the past three months

Most respondents had experienced various degrees of sub-health symptoms within the last three months, and 23% were frequently affected by at least three symptoms, leading to a decline in overall health.

4. Nearly two thirds felt their daily life was adversely affected

Nearly two thirds (64%) of the respondents complained that sub-health symptoms were affecting their daily life. A majority of them thought sub-health symptoms affected their work performance, and secondly, left them listless with no spirit or energy, as well as affecting their family and social life.

Key findings II: Sub-health and daily life

The 15 sub-health symptoms were divided into two groups, namely physical health-related sub-health symptoms (8 symptoms) and mental health-related symptoms (7 symptoms) for the purpose of in-depth analysis. The frequencies of occurrence of both the physical and mental-related symptoms were also analyzed based on the daily habits of the respondents. (*Please refer to Table 2 & 3 in supplementary information*),

5. Lack of exercise contributes to an increase in physical health-related sub-health symptoms

The researchers found a higher frequency of sub-health symptoms in the less exercised group than the regular exercise group.

There is a close relationship between exercise level and frequency of physical sub-health symptoms: 62% from the less exercised group (on average less than one 30-min exercise per week) showed a high frequency of physical sub-health symptoms. While in the regular exercise group (on average more than one 30-min exercise per week), only 47% reported a high frequency. This shows that exercise may help to reduce sub-health symptoms happen.

6. Mental health-related sub-health symptoms may be related to lack of sleep

61% of the respondents with less than eight hours' sleep per day showed high frequencies of mental sub-health symptoms than those who got sufficient sleep (more than eight hours' sleep per day), suggesting a relationship between lack of sleep and mental sub-health.

Listen to the warning signs, before it's too late

Professor Cecilia L. W. Chan, Si Yuan Professor in Health and Social Work at The University of Hong Kong pointed out that Hong Kong people's fast-paced lifestyle, poor diet, long working hours, lack of sleep and exercise were all factors that may contribute to impaired immune system function and psychological well-being. This might, in turn, have negative impact on work performance, family and social lives, trapping people in a vicious cycle. Notably, the middle-aged working population was affected the most. They tended to ignore their health conditions due to the constant pressure from work and family, Professor Chan added.

Professor Chan stressed that "Sub-health is different from illness. A person with sub-health problems may appear perfectly normal to others. It is common sense to seek for medical consultation when one feels sick, but people suffering from sub-health symptoms, i.e. the intermediate state of disease and health, may not even aware of their vulnerable health conditions, and thus at a greater risk of developing a chronic disease. The impact of sub-health should not be underestimated."

"Apart from adequate sleep and proper amount of exercise, it is also important to keep a positive attitude, and a balanced diet may help the body to perform at its best." she added.

Tips to Fight Sub-Health

- Balanced Diet
- Proper amount of exercise
- Adequate sleep

Supplementary information

Table 1) 15 sub-health symptoms are as follows:

Dizziness and headache	Chronic fatigue	Chest congestion
Aching or tired eyes	Back pain	Breathlessness
Indigestion	Frequent colds	Anxiety
Intolerance to cold	Impaired short-term memory	Sore throat
Difficulty concentrating	Sleep disorders	Low mood

Table 2) Scoring system based on the frequency of the symptoms

Always	Sometimes	Occasionally	Never
3	2	1	0

Table 3) Mental and physical health-related sub-health symptoms: frequency and impact evaluation

	Mental health-related symptoms	Physical health-related symptoms
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sleep disorders • Dizziness and headache • Low mood • Anxiety • Chest congestion • Impaired short-term memory • Difficulty concentrating 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Back pain • Chronic fatigue • Aching or tired eyes • Breathlessness • Indigestion • Frequent colds • Intolerance to cold • Sore throat
Scores	Minimum: 0 Maximum: 21	Minimum: 0 Maximum: 24
Classification	Score 0-5: Low frequency of symptoms Score 6-21: High frequency of symptoms	Score 0-8: Low frequency of symptoms Score 9-24: High frequency of symptoms