

The more you fear ageing, the faster your body may age

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Worrying about getting older especially fearing future health problems, may actually speed up ageing at the cellular level, according to new research from the New York University.



In a study of more than 700 women, those who felt more anxious about ageing showed signs of faster biological ageing in their blood, measured using cutting-edge “epigenetic clocks.” Fears about declining health had the strongest link, while concerns about beauty or fertility didn’t appear to have the same biological impact.

New research from NYU School of Global Public Health suggests that these fears could be linked to faster ageing at the cellular level in women.

“Our research suggests that subjective experiences may be driving objective measures of ageing,” said Mariana Rodrigues, a PHD student at NYU School of Global Public Health and the first author of the study, published in the journal *Psychoneuroendocrinology*.

“Ageing-related anxiety is not merely a psychological concern, but may leave a mark on the body with real health consequences,” added Mariana.

Many adults experience concern about ageing, including fears of illness, physical decline, and losing independence. Previous research has shown that ongoing psychological distress can influence biological aging through epigenetic changes, which are shifts in how genes are turned on or off. “we know from previous research that anxiety, depression, and mental health in general are associated with a number of physical health outcomes, but until now researchers haven’t focused on whether there is a correlation between worrying about ageing and the process of ageing itself,” said Rodrigues.

Why Women May Experience More Ageing Anxiety

Women may be especially vulnerable to anxiety about ageing. Social expectations around youth and appearance, along with concerns about fertility, can heighten stress during midlife.

“Women in midlife may also be multiple in roles, including caring for their ageing parents. As they see older family members grow older and become sick, they may worry about whether the same thing will happen to them,” Rodrigues explained.

Study Details and Epigenetic Clocks

To explore the connection between ageing anxiety and biological ageing, researchers examined data from 726 women participating in the Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study.

Participants reported how much they worried about becoming less attractive, developing health problems, or being too old to have children. Blood samples were also analyzed using two established epigenetic clocks. One measured the speed of biological ageing (DunedinPACE), while the other estimated accumulated biological damage over time (GrimAge2).

Women who reported higher levels of anxiety about growing older showed signs of faster epigenetic ageing based on the DunedinPACE clock. Accelerated epigenetic ageing has been linked in prior research to physical decline and greater risk of age-related diseases.

Not all concerns had the same impact. Worries about declining health were most strongly tied to faster biological ageing. In contrast, concerns about appearance and fertility were not significantly associated with epigenetic ageing.

Researchers note that health worries may be more persistent over time, while concerns about beauty and reproduction may lessen with age.

Mental Health and Physical Health Are Closely Linked

The findings underscore how closely mental and physical health are connected across the lifespan, even though they are often treated separately.

“Our research identifies ageing anxiety as a measurable and modifiable psychological determinant that seems to be shaping ageing biology,” said Adolfo Cuevas, associate professor of social and behavioural sciences at NYU School of Global Public Health and the study’s senior author.

At the same time, the researchers caution that the study captures only a single point in time. It cannot determine cause and effect or rule out the influence of other factors. Some coping behaviours associated with anxiety, such as smoking or alcohol use, may help explain the link.

When the team adjusted their analysis to account for these health behaviours, the association between ageing anxiety and epigenetic ageing weakened and was no longer statistically significant. Further research will be needed to understand how anxiety about ageing affects long-term biological ageing and how best to support people experiencing these fears. “Ageing is a universal experience. We need to start a discourse about how we as a society -- through our norms, structural factors, and interpersonal relationships -- address the challenges of ageing,” added Rodrigues.