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The impact of chronic insomnia on cardiovascular health

Swayam Sarvani Sahoo

Department of Microbiology, MITS School of Biotechnology, Utkal University, Odisha, India

ABSTRACT

Chronic insomnia, a prevalent sleep disorder characterized by prolonged difficulties in initiating or maintaining sleep, has emerged as a significant public health concern due to its association with adverse cardiovascular outcomes. This paper explores the pathways through which chronic insomnia affects cardiovascular health, emphasizing its role in increasing risks for hypertension, coronary artery disease, heart failure, and stroke. Mechanistic studies indicate that the chronic activation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and heightened inflammatory responses play a central role in linking sleep disturbances to cardiovascular pathology. Furthermore, chronic insomnia's contributions to sympathetic overactivity, metabolic dysregulation, and altered heart rate variability compound cardiovascular risk. This study highlights epidemiological evidence, underlying mechanisms, and clinical implications, providing a comprehensive understanding of the cardiovascular burden imposed by chronic insomnia. Interventions targeting sleep improvement could be a preventive approach to reduce cardiovascular risks. However, further research is required to elucidate the full range of pathways involved and to evaluate the efficacy of insomnia treatments in mitigating cardiovascular outcomes.

KEYWORDS

Chronic insomnia; Cardiovascular health; Hypertension; Heart disease; Inflammation

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Introduction

Chronic insomnia is recognized as a condition involving recurrent and persistent sleep disturbances, affecting approximately 10-15% of the adult population worldwide. Defined by difficulty in sleep initiation, maintenance, or early awakening at least three nights per week over a period of at least three months, chronic insomnia disrupts normal physiological processes, impacting both mental and physical health. Research over the past two decades has established a robust link between chronic insomnia and cardiovascular health, revealing the potential for severe consequences that extend beyond impaired quality of life [1]. The underlying mechanisms involve a complex interplay of neuroendocrine, inflammatory, and autonomic processes, suggesting that the consequences of insomnia are not limited to fatigue or cognitive deficits but also include measurable physiological damage that increases cardiovascular risk [2].

Prevalence of Insomnia and Its Public Health Significance

Insomnia is one of the most common sleep disorders, with prevalence rates varying between populations but estimated to affect nearly one-third of adults at some point in their lives. Approximately 10-15% of individuals experience chronic insomnia, which has been linked to multiple comorbidities, particularly cardiovascular diseases (CVDs). The chronic nature of insomnia, compounded by its association with stress and poor mental health, exacerbates its effects on the cardiovascular system [3]. This public health issue has significant implications, as untreated chronic insomnia is associated with an increased incidence of hypertension, coronary artery disease, stroke, and heart failure [4].

Insomnia and Cardiovascular Health: An Overview

Insomnia's impact on cardiovascular health is multifaceted, involving both direct and indirect pathways that exacerbate risk factors for cardiovascular diseases. Studies have indicated that the chronic stress and sleep deprivation associated with insomnia activate the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, increasing levels of cortisol and other stress hormones [5]. This persistent elevation contributes to systemic inflammation, sympathetic nervous system (SNS) overactivity, and metabolic dysregulation, all of which play significant roles in cardiovascular pathogenesis [6]. Furthermore, insomnia has been linked to an increased risk of conditions such as hypertension and coronary artery disease, underscoring the clinical relevance of sleep health in preventing cardiovascular diseases.

Pathophysiology: Mechanisms Involving Chronic Insomnia to Cardiovascular Health

Hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis dysregulation

One of the primary mechanisms by which chronic insomnia influences cardiovascular health is through the dysregulation of the HPA axis. Chronic insomnia stimulates a heightened release of corticotropin-releasing hormone (CRH), leading to increased levels of cortisol, a potent stress hormone [7]. This chronic activation maintains a state of physiological arousal, contributing to persistent high blood pressure and inflammation—two established risk factors for cardiovascular disease. Prolonged cortisol release also affects glucose metabolism and lipid profiles, further exacerbating cardiovascular risk [8].

***Correspondence:** Ms. Swayam Sarvani Sahoo, Department of Microbiology, MITS School of Biotechnology, Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, 751024, Odisha, India, e-mail: swayamsarvani@gmail.com

Sympathetic nervous system (SNS) overactivity

Individuals with chronic insomnia exhibit increased SNS activity, reflected in elevated heart rates and blood pressure, even during sleep. This sympathetic dominance not only impairs the body's natural parasympathetic recovery processes but also contributes to arterial stiffness, endothelial dysfunction, and increased peripheral resistance all of which are risk factors for cardiovascular morbidity [9]. Sympathetic overactivity has also been implicated in arrhythmogenesis, highlighting the arrhythmic risk associated with insomnia and its possible contribution to sudden cardiac death [10].

Inflammatory pathways

Chronic insomnia has been shown to induce low-grade systemic inflammation, marked by increased levels of inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein (CRP), interleukin-6 (IL-6), and tumor necrosis factor-alpha (TNF-α) [11]. These pro-inflammatory cytokines are closely associated with the development and progression of atherosclerosis, a key factor in cardiovascular diseases. Moreover, inflammation related to insomnia contributes to endothelial dysfunction, a hallmark of cardiovascular pathology that predisposes individuals to thrombosis and plaque formation, thereby increasing the risk of acute coronary events.

Altered metabolic function and obesity

Metabolic abnormalities, including insulin resistance and dyslipidemia, are more common in individuals with chronic insomnia, creating a conducive environment for cardiovascular disease development [12]. Insomnia has been shown to alter ghrelin and leptin levels—hormones that regulate hunger and satiety—leading to increased appetite, weight gain, and higher rates of obesity, a major risk factor for cardiovascular conditions [13]. Furthermore, insulin resistance, commonly observed in individuals with poor sleep quality, leads to an increased risk of type 2 diabetes, another major cardiovascular risk factor.

Heart rate variability and autonomic dysfunction

Heart rate variability (HRV), an indicator of autonomic nervous system function, is often reduced in individuals with chronic insomnia, signifying an imbalance between sympathetic and parasympathetic activities [14]. Reduced HRV has been associated with heightened cardiovascular risk, as it reflects impaired cardiac autonomic regulation and an increased risk of arrhythmias. Chronic insomnia, by reducing HRV, disrupts autonomic balance, predisposing individuals to cardiovascular complications.

Epidemiological evidence of cardiovascular risks associated with chronic insomnia

Epidemiological studies underscore the significant cardiovascular risks associated with chronic insomnia. Large-scale cohort studies have found a dose-response relationship between the severity of insomnia symptoms and the incidence of cardiovascular disease. For instance, a study published in Circulation demonstrated that individuals with chronic insomnia had a 27% increased risk of developing coronary artery disease and a 45% increased risk of heart failure compared to those without sleep disturbances [15]. Furthermore, insomnia has been associated with a 20-30% increase in the risk of developing hypertension, as sleep deprivation promotes SNS activation and vascular resistance, both of which contribute to elevated blood pressure.

A systematic review published in Sleep Medicine Reviews found that insomnia was associated with a 34% increase in the risk of cardiovascular mortality. The evidence of an association between insomnia and stroke is also strong, with studies suggesting that individuals with insomnia have a 50% higher risk of stroke. This heightened risk may be partially explained by the role of insomnia in promoting systemic inflammation, endothelial dysfunction, and thrombogenesis.

Clinical Implications and Treatment Approaches

Cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I)

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I) is a first-line, evidence-based treatment that has shown efficacy in reducing insomnia symptoms and improving cardiovascular health markers [16]. CBT-I includes techniques like sleep restriction, stimulus control, cognitive restructuring, and relaxation training, aiming to alleviate hyperarousal and improve sleep continuity. Studies have shown that CBT-I not only improves sleep quality but also reduces blood pressure, inflammation, and sympathetic overactivity, suggesting that it may be an effective preventive measure for cardiovascular disease.

Pharmacological treatments and risks

Pharmacological treatments, such as benzodiazepines and non-benzodiazepine sedatives, are sometimes prescribed for chronic insomnia but are generally recommended for short-term use due to potential dependency and adverse effects [17]. While these medications can improve sleep initiation, they do not address the underlying hyperarousal associated with insomnia, and some evidence suggests that long-term use may increase cardiovascular risk. Melatonin agonists and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are also options for certain populations, as they can modulate the circadian rhythm and alleviate anxiety, indirectly benefiting cardiovascular health.

Lifestyle modifications

Lifestyle changes, such as regular exercise, maintaining a consistent sleep schedule, and avoiding caffeine or heavy meals before bedtime, are widely recommended for individuals with insomnia. Regular physical activity has been shown to improve sleep quality and reduce cardiovascular risk factors, including hypertension and obesity. Additionally, mindfulness practices and stress-reduction techniques can reduce hyperarousal and SNS overactivity, contributing to cardiovascular and overall health [18].

Conclusions

Chronic insomnia is a prevalent and debilitating condition with far-reaching implications for cardiovascular health. The pathophysiology of insomnia-induced cardiovascular risk involves a complex interplay of neuroendocrine, autonomic, inflammatory, and metabolic mechanisms, all of which contribute to hypertension, coronary artery disease, heart failure, and stroke. Epidemiological studies consistently support an association between insomnia and increased cardiovascular morbidity and mortality, underscoring the importance of effective treatment strategies. Interventions such as CBT-I,

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lifestyle changes, and, in some cases, pharmacological treatments, offer promise in alleviating insomnia symptoms and mitigating cardiovascular risk. Given the public health burden of chronic insomnia, further research is warranted to explore the full spectrum of its impact on cardiovascular health. Future studies should aim to identify biomarkers of insomnia-related cardiovascular risk and evaluate the effectiveness of novel therapies in reducing both sleep disturbances and cardiovascular outcomes. By prioritizing sleep health as an integral component of cardiovascular disease prevention, healthcare providers can make significant strides in reducing the incidence of cardiovascular complications associated with chronic insomnia.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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