

Psychosocial risk factors for sick leave at the individual and organizational level: a multilevel analysis

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Background. Psychosocial work risks have been related to higher sick leave.

Aim. The aim was to examine psychosocial risk factors for sick leave at the individual and organizational level.

Methods. Results are based on pooled data from the BELSTRESS I (1995-'99) and BELSTRESS III (2004) studies comprising 24.110 workers (72% men) aged 30–59 years from 31 private and public organizations. Questionnaires were used to assess individual, socio-demographic, health-related and work factors. Psychosocial and physical work factors were measured by means of the Job Content Questionnaire. Prospective data of registered sick leave during one year were collected. The individual job demand, job control and social support scores were aggregated as mean values at the organizational level. A multilevel logistic regression model was applied.

Results. High sick leave frequency (at least 3 sick leave episodes during follow-up) was observed in 17% of the sample. After adjusting for gender, age, educational level and physical job demands, low social support at both the individual and organizational level had an independent and significant positive effect on high sick leave frequency. Similar results were obtained when additionally adjusting for general health perception, smoking, alcohol consumption and obesity. Only the individual and not the organizational level of low job control significantly increased the risk for high sick leave frequency. No associations were observed for individual or organizational job demand.

Conclusion. Working in an organizational climate characterized by a reduced level of social support results in higher sick leave frequency, independent from the individual perceived social support.