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Associations of Wealth with Frailty and Memory Impairment Across the Course of Aging

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Abstract

Background. Socio-economic inequalities in health are found across the entire lifespan. This study investigates to which extent wealth possibly varies in its association with health, particularly frailty as well-described phenotype in aging, and memory as precondition of successful everyday functioning, across different ages.

Method. Data come from recent waves (2013/15) of the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe, with 48,209 respondents from 16 European countries and Israel, aged 50-104 years. Household wealth information was adjusted for purchasing power, household size, and percentile-ranked for each country. Frailty was assessed using the adapted Fried criteria. Memory impairment was indicated if respondents remembered ≤ 1 word of a ten-word list after some delay. We subsequently controlled for socio-demographic characteristics and education in logistic regressions testing interactions between age and wealth rank.

Results. In fully adjusted models, being one decile lower in the wealth distribution was associated with 13.4 % higher probability of being frail (Coeff. -1.26; CI -1.38, -1.14), and 8.2 % higher probability of being memory-impaired (Coeff. -0.78; CI -0.88, -0.68). Interactions between age and wealth rank indicated least risk of both frailty and memory impairment for wealthier individuals between ages 75 and 80.

Discussion. Wealth is associated with the likelihood of being frail or memory-impaired in a large sample of older respondents from Europe and Israel. The fact that wealth is strongest associated with health between ages 75 and 80 suggests that individuals are particularly benefitting from socioeconomic resources at advanced older ages. Possible selection and underlying mechanisms are discussed.