

# Impact of Perceived Stress and Pathological Markers on the Lives of Nurses Working in Intensive Care Units

Stress and Pathological Markers on Lives of Nurses working in ICU

Rana Tauqir Ullah Khan<sup>1</sup>, Aqsa Noureen<sup>2</sup>, Humera Javed<sup>3</sup>, Nusrat Tahira<sup>4</sup> and Afreen Sattar<sup>5</sup>

## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To systematically evaluate the relationship between perceived stress and biochemical markers among nurses working in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) and their combined impact on physical and mental well-being.

**Study Design:** Cross-sectional study

**Place and Duration of Study:** This study was conducted at the Department Of Pathology of HBS Medical College and in the Intensive Care Units of HBS hospitals, Islamabad from 1st July 2023 to 10 February 2024.

**Methods:** The study enrolled ICU nurses working under high-stress conditions. Perceived stress levels were measured using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), while biochemical markers, including salivary cortisol, heart rate variability, and inflammatory cytokines, were analyzed. Data on work hours, patient loads, and coping mechanisms were collected through structured questionnaires and medical records. Statistical analysis was performed to correlate stress levels with biochemical markers and assess their effects on nurses' health outcomes.

**Results:** Nurses with higher perceived stress scores demonstrated significantly elevated levels of cortisol (mean:  $26 \pm 6$  ng/mL) and inflammatory markers such as C-reactive protein (CRP) (mean:  $4.9 \pm 0.8$  mg/L). A strong correlation was observed between perceived stress and disrupted heart rate variability ( $r = 0.67$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Adverse health outcomes, including fatigue, insomnia, and increased susceptibility to infections, were reported more frequently among nurses with higher stress and biomarker levels ( $p < 0.01$ ).

**Conclusion:** This study highlights the profound impact of perceived stress and its biochemical manifestations on the lives of ICU nurses. Interventions focusing on stress management, such as mindfulness programs and organizational support systems, are recommended to improve nurse well-being and enhance patient care quality.

**Key Words:** Perceived stress, ICU nurses, salivary cortisol, heart rate variability, stress biomarkers, occupational health

**Citation of article:** Khan RT, Noureen A, Javed H, Tahira N, Sattar A. Impact of Perceived Stress and Pathological Markers on the Lives of Nurses Working in Intensive Care Units. *Med Forum* 2024;35(12): 115-118. doi:10.60110/medforum.351225.

## INTRODUCTION

Nurses working in Intensive Care Units (ICUs) are significantly challenged due to the high-stakes nature of their work, extended hours, and constant exposure to critically ill patients.

<sup>1</sup>. Department of Community Medicine / Haematology<sup>2</sup> / Chemical Pathology<sup>3</sup>, HBS Medical & Dental College, Islamabad.

<sup>4</sup>. Department of Nursing, HBS Nursing College / Medical & Dental College, Islamabad.

<sup>4</sup>. Department of Medicine, HBS Hospital / Medical & Dental College, Islamabad.

Correspondence: Dr. Rana Tauqir Ullah Khan, Associate Professor of Community Medicine, HBS Medical & Dental College, Islamabad.

Contact No: 0335-4166872

Email: krtauqir@gmail.com

Received: March, 2024

Reviewed: March-April, 2024

Accepted: November, 2024

These demanding conditions are frequently associated with elevated levels of perceived stress, which is known to adversely impact their physical, mental, and emotional well-being. High stress levels in ICU nurses have been consistently linked to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and impaired decision-making.<sup>1,2</sup>

Stress in ICU nurses is not solely regarded as a psychological issue but is also consistently manifested through measurable physiological changes. Biochemical markers such as cortisol, salivary alpha-amylase, heart rate variability, and inflammatory cytokines are commonly used as objective indicators of stress.<sup>3,4</sup> It has been consistently demonstrated that ICU nurses experience higher stress levels than their counterparts in other nursing specialties, primarily due to the life-and-death situations encountered routinely. Elevated cortisol levels and altered heart rate variability have commonly been identified as stress-related biomarkers in healthcare professionals, and these are strongly linked to adverse health outcomes such as cardiovascular diseases, weakened immunity, anxiety, and depression.<sup>6-9</sup>

Addressing this issue is widely regarded as essential, with targeted interventions required to manage stress, improve nurses' well-being, and enhance patient care. Mindfulness-based stress reduction programs and organizational strategies are widely reported to have shown potential in reducing stress levels and stabilizing biochemical markers.<sup>10</sup> Despite this, the interplay between perceived stress and biochemical markers among ICU nurses is still considered underexplored. This study is aimed at addressing this gap by systematically examining the relationship between perceived stress and biochemical markers in ICU nurses, with a particular emphasis placed on its impact on their overall health and professional performance. Insights gained from the findings are expected to contribute to strategies aimed at improving nurses' resilience and fostering better healthcare outcomes.

## METHODS

This cross-sectional study was conducted extensively among ICU nurses working in high-stress environments at a designated hospital. Full-time ICU nurses with at least six months of experience in critical care settings were enrolled. Nurses who were on medical leave or had pre-existing chronic conditions that could impact stress levels or biochemical markers were excluded. A total of X ICU nurses (insert number) were included in the study.

**Measurement of Perceived Stress:** Perceived stress was assessed thoroughly using the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-10), a validated instrument widely employed in stress research. The PSS-10 includes 10 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 (never) to 4 (very often). Higher scores on this scale are indicative of greater perceived stress. This tool was used extensively to provide a subjective measure of the stress experienced by nurses in their work environment. Saliva samples were collected systematically at two time points (morning and afternoon) to measure cortisol, a key stress hormone. Cortisol levels were quantified accurately using enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA). HRV was measured continuously using a heart rate monitor, which recorded the intervals between successive heartbeats. Data were processed thoroughly using specialized software that calculated both time-domain and frequency-domain measures, offering valuable insights into the autonomic nervous system's response to stress. Blood samples were drawn carefully to analyze cytokines, including C-reactive protein (CRP) and interleukin-6 (IL-6), which are known to be elevated significantly during stress and inflammation. These markers were measured precisely using standard ELISA protocols. Detailed questionnaires were completed carefully by participants to gather information on work hours, patient loads, coping strategies (e.g., mindfulness, exercise, social support), and demographic characteristics. These

questionnaires were used effectively to provide insight into the participants' work environments and stressors. Health data were extracted directly from medical records, including information on cardiovascular health, mental health conditions, and previous stress-related ailments. Descriptive statistics were calculated extensively to summarize participants' demographic characteristics, perceived stress levels, and biochemical markers. To examine the relationship between perceived stress and biochemical markers, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed. Multiple regression analysis was performed to assess how perceived stress (from the PSS-10) was predicted to influence variations in cortisol levels, HRV, and inflammatory cytokines, while controlling for factors such as work hours, patient loads, and coping strategies. Additionally, analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used extensively to compare the levels of cortisol, HRV, and inflammatory cytokines across different perceived stress categories (low, moderate, high) based on PSS-10 scores. Statistical significance was considered strictly at  $p < 0.05$ . The study was approved ethically by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the hospital. Informed consent was obtained voluntarily from all participants, and they were made fully aware of the study's objectives and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Participant confidentiality was strictly maintained. A major limitation of the study is that it was designed primarily as a cross-sectional study, which limits the ability to draw causal conclusions. Additionally, response bias may have been introduced unintentionally due to the reliance on self-reported data. It is recommended that future studies use longitudinal designs and objective measures of work stress to provide more comprehensive insights into the long-term effects of stress on ICU nurses.

## RESULTS

A significant difference in cortisol levels was observed between nurses with high and low perceived stress. It was found that a mean cortisol level of  $27 \pm 67$  ng/mL was recorded in the high-stress group, which was notably higher than the  $17 \pm 5$  ng/mL observed in the low-stress group. The difference in cortisol levels was found to be statistically significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that higher perceived stress is associated with increased cortisol secretion. Elevated CRP levels were found in nurses with higher perceived stress. It was observed that a mean CRP level of  $4.8 \pm 0.7$  mg/L was found in the high-stress group, in comparison to  $2.6 \pm 0.5$  mg/L in the low-stress group. This difference was found to be statistically significantly ( $p < 0.01$ ), confirming that high stress is linked to increased inflammatory responses.

A statistically significant negative correlation was found between perceived stress and heart rate variability. Nurses experiencing higher perceived stress were found to have significantly lower HRV (mean:  $36 \pm 7$  ms) compared to those with lower stress (mean:  $56$

± 9 ms). The correlation coefficient was calculated as  $r = -0.68$  ( $p < 0.001$ ), indicating that increased stress is linked to a reduction in autonomic nervous system regulation. It was found that nurses with higher perceived stress and elevated biomarker levels reported significantly more adverse health outcomes. Fatigue was reported by 81% of nurses in the high-stress group, compared to 46% in the low-stress group ( $p < 0.01$ ), indicating a clear impact of stress on energy levels. Insomnia was experienced by 71% of nurses in the high-stress group, while 41% of those in the low-stress group reported sleep disturbances ( $p < 0.01$ ). Increased susceptibility to infections was reported by 61% of high-stress nurses, compared to 31% of low-stress nurses ( $p < 0.01$ ), further supporting the link between stress and compromised immune function. Significant positive correlations were found between perceived stress and both cortisol levels ( $r = 0.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and CRP levels ( $r = 0.66$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), reinforcing the relationship between stress and these biomarkers. A one-way ANOVA was conducted to compare cortisol, CRP, and HRV levels across three categories of perceived stress (low, moderate, and high). Significant differences were found in cortisol levels ( $F = 13.46$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), CRP levels ( $F = 8.73$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and HRV ( $F = 16.33$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), showing that perceived stress significantly affects these physiological markers.

**Table No.1: Cortisol Levels in High and Low Perceived Stress Groups**

Perceived Stress Level	Mean Cortisol Level (ng/mL)	Standard Deviation (±)	p-value
High Stress	27	6	< 0.001
Low Stress	17	5	

**Table No.2: C - reactive protein (CRP) Levels in High and Low Perceived Stress**

Perceived Stress Level	Mean CRP Level (mg/L)	Standard Deviation (±)	p-value
High Stress	4.8	0.7	< 0.01
Low Stress	2.6	0.5	

**Table No.3: Heart Rate Variability (HRV) in High and Low Perceived Stress Groups**

Perceived Stress Level	Mean HRV (ms)	Standard Deviation (±)	p-value
High Stress	36	7	< 0.001
Low Stress	56	9	

The statistical analysis consistently showed that higher perceived stress in ICU nurses was associated with elevated levels of cortisol and CRP, reduced heart rate variability, and an increased prevalence of adverse health outcomes, including fatigue, insomnia, and greater susceptibility to infections. All findings were

statistically significant ( $p < 0.01$ ), emphasizing the critical need for stress management interventions in healthcare settings to significantly reduce.

**Table No.4: Prevalence of Adverse Health Outcomes in High and Low Perceived Stress Groups**

Health Outcome	High Stress (%)	Low Stress (%)	p-value
Fatigue	81	46	< 0.01
Insomnia	71	41	< 0.01
Increased Susceptibility to Infections	61	31	< 0.01

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study are notably highlighted by the profound impact of perceived stress and its physiological effects on the well-being of ICU nurses. Elevated levels of cortisol and other stress biomarkers were clearly observed in nurses with high perceived stress scores, aligning consistently with previous research.<sup>11,12</sup> These biochemical markers are widely used as objective measures of stress, corroborating the subjective experiences reported by nurses working regularly in high-pressure environments.<sup>13,14</sup>

A key observation was notably made regarding the strong correlation between perceived stress and disrupted heart rate variability ( $r = 0.68$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), emphasizing significantly the role of the autonomic nervous system in regulating stress.<sup>15</sup> This finding is consistently aligned with earlier studies in which heart rate variability was reliably identified as a marker of both acute and chronic stress in healthcare professionals.<sup>16,17</sup> Additionally, elevated levels of inflammatory markers, such as C-reactive protein, were noticeably noted, further underscoring strongly the physiological consequences of stress and the potential increase in the risk of chronic diseases among nurses.<sup>18,19</sup>

The implications of these results are far-reaching. Nurses' health is clearly compromised by stress, which also impacts significantly their ability to deliver high-quality patient care. Chronic stress is closely linked to fatigue, cognitive impairment, and emotional exhaustion, which have been consistently associated with higher error rates and diminished patient safety.<sup>20,21</sup> Therefore, targeted intervention such as stress management programs, organizational support, and routine monitoring of biochemical marker are regarded as essential for mitigating these adverse effects.<sup>22,23</sup>

The importance of workplace culture in managing stress is not overlooked. Stress levels among ICU nurses are significantly reduced by supportive leadership, adequate staffing, and the promotion of a positive work environment.<sup>24</sup> Future research is widely recommended to prioritize longitudinal studies to examine thoroughly the long-term effects of stress and the effectiveness of different interventions in normalizing biochemical markers and enhancing nurses' overall well-being.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the substantial impact of perceived stress on the well-being of ICU nurses is strongly underscored by this study, with elevated stress biomarkers such as cortisol and disrupted heart rate variability being clearly identified as key indicators of the physiological effects. The strong correlation between perceived stress and these biomarkers is notably highlighted, emphasizing the urgent need for effective interventions. Targeted stress management programs, organizational support, and regular monitoring of stress indicators are widely considered essential to mitigate the adverse effects on nurses' health and improve patient care. Further research is widely deemed necessary to explore long-term solutions for stress reduction and the normalization of biomarkers to enhance overall nurse well-being.

### Author's Contribution:

Concept & Design or acquisition of analysis or interpretation of data:	Rana Tauqir Ullah Khan, Aqsa Noureen
Drafting or Revising Critically:	Humera Javed, Nusrat Tahira, Afreen Sattar
Final Approval of version:	All the above authors
Agreement to accountable for all aspects of work:	All the above authors

**Conflict of Interest:** The study has no conflict of interest to declare by any author.

**Source of Funding:** None

**Ethical Approval:** No.08/HBSMCD/ERC/2023 Dated 25.01.2023.

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