

Recurrent or chronic symptoms :prevalence and associations in paediatric age

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INTRODUCTION In the last decade many syndromes characterized by recurrent or chronic symptoms have been described and investigated each being the result of the efforts to coalesce under specific labels patients suffering mixtures of chronic or recurrent of symptoms. This constitutes an emerging clinical problem. However solid information about the prevalence of these symptoms in the general population are lacking, especially so in the pediatric age. We tried to start filling this gap.

METHODS Between 2003 and 2004 a group of physicians and technicians of the, at that time, recently opened Pediatric Clinic of Sant' Andrea Hospital of Rome performed an epidemiological survey. For several reasons the results of the study were never published. The study addressed a cohort of 3480 unselected schoolchildren, aged 9-10 years, of 8 schools north of Rome. A standardised questionnaire filled by parents concerning the presence of 4 groups of common clinical symptoms was administered.

RESULTS The prevalence of the main symptoms in each of the four groups were as follows: respiratory: asthma 18.2%; dermatological: eczema 14.7%; gastro-intestinal: abdominal ache 43.2%; neuro-behavioural: headache 54.6%. Asthma resulted to be significantly associated with rhinitis, eczema, itching, abdominal ache and headache. Frequent abdominal ache was significantly associated with asthma, stuffy nose, eczema, itching and headache. Frequent headache was significantly associated with asthma, stuffy nose, eczema, itching, abdominal ache and sleep disturbances.

CONCLUSION Our study documented an unexpectedly high frequency of chronic and recurrent symptoms: their strong statistical association suggests the existence of a cluster of individuals who could be considered "affected by a syndrome". In general our data suggest the existence in the general population of a variable capacity to remain resistant or viceversa become ipersensitized in front of the numerous environmental irritating factors.