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SOMATIC SYMPTOMS IN A COMMUNITY SAMPLE OF ETHIOPIAN IMMIGRANTS IN TORONTO, CANADA

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Objective: This study examines the occurrence and correlates of somatization in a sample of adult Ethiopian immigrants and refugees residing in Toronto, Canada.

Methods: A random sample of 342 adult (≥ 18 years of age) Ethiopian immigrants and refugees in Toronto completed structured face-to-face interviews. The Diagnostic Interview Schedule (DIS) Somatization Disorder Module was used to collect data on somatic symptoms. The Composite International Diagnostic Interview (CIDI) was used to assess major depression and generalized anxiety disorder.

Results: Nearly two-thirds of the study participants reported having had at least one somatic symptom, and 5% reported experiencing medically unexplained symptoms in the 12 months preceding the interview. Individuals with major depression had significantly increased number of somatic symptoms compared to those without major depressive disorder. In a multivariate linear regression analysis, controlling for major depressive disorder, a higher level of somatization was associated with older age, pre-migration trauma, and post-migration stressful life events, and limited English proficiency.

Conclusion: The findings of the study suggest that somatic symptoms are prevalent among individuals in cross-cultural transition and symptom level was associated with pre-migration trauma, post-migration stressors and mental disorder, particularly depressive disorder. The data also indicate a need for primary care physicians to routinely screen immigrant minority clients who present with somatic complaints for common and treatable psychiatric conditions, such as depression. In minority immigrant communities, somatic symptoms may reflect psychiatric problems.