

Exclusively on NJ.com

The Star-Ledger

Getting sick of long rides on the train

Study: Commuting stress may worsen health woes

Tuesday, August 29, 2006

BY JUDY PEET

Star-Ledger Staff

For years, the prevailing New Jersey commuter philosophy has been: When the driving gets tough, the tough get a railpass.

But commuting by train is also stressful, according to a new study that found the longer the rail commute, the higher the strain. With every passing mile, there is an impact not only on physical and psychological well-being, but also on the ability to complete simple tasks, the study concluded.

"We've known for a long time that there is a correlation between stress of driving in congested commuter traffic and heart" attacks, said Richard Wener, a professor of environmental psychology at Polytechnic University and one of the study's authors.

"With this study, we are suggesting that the stress of long train commutes may pose a similar health problem," added Wener, who commutes by train every day from his Maplewood home to his classes in Brooklyn. "Trains are not as stressful as cars at rush hour, but even a relatively minor stressor, several hours a day, every day of the year, can build to a health risk."

New Jersey commuters were studied because rail commuting here is "worse than in most places," Wener said. The expansion of suburbia here also means the average rail commute is getting longer and longer.

Sitting on the train last night, returning from a hard day in Manhattan, few commuters were surprised at the study results.

"Of course the ride is stressful; everybody is pretty much in a daze after they get off the train," said accounting firm manager Mike D'Angelo, whose commute between Denville and Manhattan takes about 70 minutes. "If I could afford to move closer, like to Summit, of course I would."

Food buyer Joseph Cammarta, who commutes to New York from Dover, complained that the seats are too tight and passengers are jammed between bags, but added that the real bother "is cell phones. That's where the stress comes in."

The researchers studied 208 commuters taking trains from New Jersey to Manhattan on the Midtown Direct line. The subjects, who ranged in age from 25 to 60, commuted at least three days a week and had been on the same route for at least 12 months.

The trips ranged from 59 minutes, door-to-door, to 104 minutes.

The participants were about evenly split between men and women, but of similar education and socio-economic backgrounds. Eighty percent were college graduates, and the median income approached \$100,000.

Wener and Gary Evans, a professor of environmental analysis at Cornell University, used several methods to evaluate stress levels.

The commuters' saliva was tested for the stress hormone cortisol at the end of the commute, and, for comparison, during a weekend at home. The commuters and their spouses also filled out questionnaires rating their stress levels, and the riders were asked to proofread a simple office memo at the end of a long commute.

The study found that average cortisol levels rose in direct proportion to the length of time on the train. People who had a 100-minute commute had, on average, more than three times the cortisol levels of people who had only a 60-minute commute.

The ability to pick up errors proofreading declined in a similar pattern, the researchers found. Self-reporting responses supported the increased frustration and irritability of the long commute.

"Ethnicity, profession and gender didn't seem to matter, although mothers with children at home had the highest stress levels," Wener said, adding that the study sponsored by NJ Transit did not take into account factors such as train conditions, seat locations or train changes.

Wener said the potential impact on work productivity following a long commute "should be of concern to employers and infrastructure planners."

New Jerseyans are tough, however, and a number of passengers polled by The Star-Ledger simply shrugged and agreed with Larry Sobol, a financial adviser from Morristown, who said: "Deal with it."

That does not mean they don't have suggestions. The overwhelming favorite was to take out the middle seat. People would rather stand than sit there.

Other rider suggestions included more cars, more space, electric hookups and wireless Internet connections on the cars, better lighting, club cars and better notification of train delays at the stations.

NJ Transit spokesman Dan Stessel said the agency is making several improvements that passengers have requested.

He noted 234 new cars are expected to go on line beginning later this year, with better amenities, better lighting and, best of all, no third seat.

Critics noted, however, there will not be enough new, amenity-filled trains, and most riders will still be forced to use the old, crowded cars. They said the pace of improvement is too slow and it will be up to commuters to manage their stress.

Staff writer Rohina Phadnis contributed to this report.

© 2006 The Star Ledger
© 2006 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.