

Child Abuse Raises Risk Of Illness In Adulthood

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Child abuse has had a known association with increased risk for virtually all types of psychological and psychiatric problems but a new evidence review suggests that it raises the risk of physical illness just as much.

The review analyzed data from 24 studies comprising 48,801 adults who had been victims of sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse or neglect as children.

"The potential negative effects of abuse are as large in magnitude for physical health as they are for mental health," said study co-author Cinnamon Stetler, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Furman University in South Carolina.

The average age of participants was 38; most were women and the time that had passed since the abuse varied among studies.

"In general, the odds of a person who experienced child abuse developing a physical health problem in adulthood are roughly twice that of a person who did not experience physical abuse," Stetler said.

The risk of having neurological or musculoskeletal problems things like headaches, dizziness and broken bones was most elevated. However, respiratory and cardiovascular disorders were also among the most significantly elevated risks.

Said Stetler, "Your exposure to really severe stressors like abuse in childhood may program the body's stress system to respond in ways that may be adaptive in the immediate environment, but over the long term can be maladaptive and take their toll."

For example, short-term stress elevates heart rate and blood pressure as part of the "fight or flight" response." This can help the body cope with a frightening situation but if the stress is chronic, having high blood pressure can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke.

The review appears online in *Psychosomatic Medicine: Journal of Biobehavioral Medicine*.

"The really important point here is that we have artificially invented a separation between mental and physical health, but the physiology of the body is unitary," said Bruce Perry, M.D., senior fellow at the ChildTrauma Academy in Houston. He is not associated with the study.

"Life-threatening experiences like abuse will influence the neuroendocrine system, the immune system and the peripheral nervous system and that all impacts on the function and long-term health of a host of organs: the heart, lungs, gut, etc.," Perry said. "Abusive experience recruits not just the brain, but the rest of body as well to adapt. When you have pervasive insults to a developing child, it's predictable that there would be problems in a variety of systems."

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