

Study reveals link between chronic childhood illness and later life mental health problems

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A new study into the effects of chronic physical illness in children on their life-long mental health has found that such experiences appear to increase the chances of them having depression and anxiety in adulthood.

Researchers at the University of Sussex and University College London systematically reviewed evidence from a large number of medical studies, looking for associations between eight chronic physical illnesses in childhood, such as arthritis, asthma and cancer, and [emotional problems](#) experienced by the sufferers in later life.

The paper, published today in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (JCPP)*, reveals that the sufferers of all chronic conditions reviewed were at increased risk of developing depression or anxiety, emotional problems that persisted beyond childhood and adolescence and into adult life.

The results suggest that [mental health](#) prevention and intervention strategies which specifically target chronic illness sufferers in youth could be vital in

treating [mental health issues](#) before they develop into more serious long term conditions.

Speaking about the findings, psychologist Dr Darya Gaysina, senior researcher on the project at the University of Sussex, said: "Very little is known about life-long effects of childhood chronic physical illness on mental health. Our results show that childhood chronic physical [illness](#) was significantly associated with adult depression in the total sample of more than 45,000 participants we studied.

"In particular, we found that cancer was significantly associated with adult depression. Although the research on other chronic conditions is very limited, when we removed cancer from the sample, the link was still there. So it is not only cancer that's associated with adult emotional problems."

Dr Gaysina feels that this connection could help mental health practitioners approach young patients with chronic conditions in a different way.

"It seems that if there is a higher risk of mental health issues in adulthood for those with childhood-onset chronic physical illnesses, further in-depth research in this area could help change the way practitioners work with youth with [chronic conditions](#), ensuring that there is as much a focus on the patient's mental health as their physical [health](#)."

More information: Ekin Secinti et al. Research Review: Childhood chronic physical illness and adult emotional health - a systematic review and meta-analysis, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* (2017). [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.12727](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12727)

Provided by University of Sussex

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