

US health officials link childhood trauma to adult illness

5 November 2019, by Mike Stobbe



In this Wednesday, Dec. 26, 2018 file photo, a pedestrian is silhouetted against wet pavement in Kansas City, Mo. In a first-of-its-kind report released Tuesday, Nov. 5, 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that millions of cases of heart disease and other illnesses can be linked to abuse and other physical and psychological harm that patients suffered as children. (AP Photo/Charlie Riedel)

U.S. health officials estimate that millions of cases of heart disease and other illnesses are linked to abuse and other physical and psychological harm suffered early in life.

In a report released Tuesday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention tried to estimate the impact of harmful [childhood experiences](#) on health in adulthood.

Health officials acknowledged the study does not prove that these experiences directly cause certain illnesses. And they were not able to rule out other possible factors, such as the stress caused by financial family problems.

But the link is strong, and is bolstered by many other studies, said Jim Mercy, who oversees the CDC's [violence prevention programs](#).

"There's a lot of evidence connecting these things," and it's become clear that the more harmful incidents a child suffers, the more likely their health suffers later, he said.

For at least two decades, researchers have been looking at how suffering or witnessing [traumatic events](#) as a child affects the likelihood of physical injury or illness later in life.

Researchers say such stressful experiences can affect how the body develops, and can also put a child on a path to smoking, drug use, and other unhealthy behaviors.

The topic has been getting more attention in recent years from public health officials. California's recently-appointed [surgeon general](#) has made [childhood trauma](#) and what is known as toxic stress a priority.

Tuesday's release is the CDC's first major report on the topic.

The findings are based on questionnaires of about 144,000 adults in 25 states that were conducted in 2015, 2016 or 2017. The surveys asked people about health problems. They also were asked about childhood experiences with divorce, abuse, domestic violence, or [drug abuse](#) in the home, or a relative's [mental illness](#).

The survey did not assess how severe the experiences were, and it's not clear if some types of incidents are more harmful than others.

But CDC officials are recommending programs to try to stop such incidents or lessen their impact. They mentioned mentoring programs, parent education, and paid family leave.

The CDC found:

—Adults who experienced the most potentially

traumatic events were more likely to smoke and drink heavily.

—Women, blacks and American Indians and Alaskan Natives were more likely to experience four or more kinds of harm during childhood.

—Preventing such events could potentially reduce the number of adults with weight problems by 2%, the number of adults with coronary heart disease by 13%, and the number of adults with depression by 44%.

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