

Chronic pain associated with poor health—and COVID-19 infection—decades later

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The study found that both short-term and chronic pain at age 44 were associated with pain and poor health in later decades of life. Credit: Žygimantas Dukauskas, Unsplash, CC0 (creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/)

People who suffer from chronic pain at age 44 are more likely to report pain, poor general health, poor mental health outcomes and joblessness in their 50s and 60s, according to a new study published this week in the open-access journal *PLOS ONE* by David Blanchflower of Dartmouth College, US, and Alex Bryson of University College London, UK.

Chronic [pain](#)—pain lasting at least three months—is a serious problem affecting a large number of people: according to the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine, more than 100 million Americans suffer from chronic pain.

In the new work, the researchers studied people enrolled in the National Child Development Survey, a study following all those born in one week in March 1958 in England, Scotland and Wales. The

main pain data used were from the Bio-Medical Survey conducted in 2003, when most of the 12,037 respondents were age 44. Additional [health](#) data was collected in 2008, 2013 and 2021.

Overall, two-fifths of those in their 40s reported suffering chronic pain. The study pinpointed multiple factors predicting pain at this age, including a person's father's [social class](#) at birth as well as pain in childhood. Both short-term and chronic pain at age 44 were associated with pain and [poor health](#) in later decades of life, with associations strongest for chronic pain. Among those reporting chronic pain at age 44, for example, 84% still reported "very severe" pain at age 50. Chronic pain, but not short-term pain, was also associated with poor mental health outcomes, lower life satisfaction, pessimism about the future, poor sleep and joblessness at age 55. Additionally, the researchers found that pain at age 44 predicts whether a respondent had been infected with COVID-19 in the 2021 survey, at age 62, suggesting that pain is associated with broader health vulnerabilities.

The authors conclude that chronic pain shows persistence across the life-course and is, in part, passed between generations.

The authors add: "Tracking a birth cohort across their life-course we find chronic pain is highly persistent. It is associated with poor mental health outcomes later in life including depression, as well as leading to poorer general health and joblessness. We hope the study highlights the need for academics and [policy makers](#) to focus more attention on the problems of [chronic pain](#)."

More information: Chronic pain: Evidence from the national child development study, *PLoS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0275095](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275095)

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