

Hard times during adolescence point to health problems later in life

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Being hard up socially and financially during adolescence and early adulthood takes its toll on the body, and leads to physiological wear and tear in middle aged men and women, irrespective of how tough things have been in the interim. According to Dr. Per E. Gustafsson from Umeå University in Sweden and colleagues, experience of social and material stressors around the time of transition into adulthood is linked to a rise in disease risk factors in middle age, including higher blood pressure, body weight and cholesterol. Their work is published online in Springer's journal *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*.

The authors looked at the influence of both social factors and material deprivation during adolescence and [adulthood](#) on the physiological wear and tear on the body that results from ongoing adaptive efforts to maintain stability in response to stressors. These adaptive efforts are known as 'allostatic load'. Allostatic load is thought to predict various health problems, including declines in physical and cognitive functioning, and cardiovascular disease and mortality.

The researchers analyzed data for 822 participants in the Northern Swedish Cohort, which follows subjects from the age of 16 for a 27-year period. They looked at measures of social [adversity](#) including parental illness and loss, social isolation, exposure to threat or violence and material adversity including parental unemployment, poor standard of living, low income and financial strain. They also examined allostatic load at age 43 based on 12 biological factors linked to cardiovascular regulation, body fat deposition, lipid metabolism, glucose metabolism,

inflammation and neuroendocrine regulation.

They found that early adversity involved a greater risk for adverse life circumstances later in adulthood. The analyses revealed adolescence as a particularly sensitive period for women and young adulthood as a particularly sensitive period for men. Specifically, women who had experienced social adversity in adolescence, and men who had experienced it during young adulthood, suffered greater allostatic load at age 43. This was independent of overall socioeconomic disadvantage and also of later adversity exposure during adulthood.

The authors conclude: "Our results support the hypothesis that physiological wear and tear visible in mid-adulthood is influenced by the accumulation of unfavourable social exposures over the life course, but also by social adversity measured around the transition into adulthood, independent of later adversity."

More information: Gustafsson PE et al (2011). Social and material adversity from adolescence to adulthood and allostatic load in middle-aged women and men: results from the Northern Swedish Cohort. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*. [DOI 10.1007/s12160-011-9309-6](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12160-011-9309-6)

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