

Study: Children abused by parents face increased cancer risk

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New Purdue research shows that frequent child abuse by a parent can increase a child's cancer risk in adulthood, and the effects are especially significant when mothers abuse their daughters and fathers abuse their sons. The research was conducted by Kenneth Ferraro, distinguished professor of sociology and director of Purdue's Center on Aging and the Life Course, and sociology and gerontology graduate student Patricia Morton. Their work was funded by the National Institute on Aging and is published online by the *Journal of Aging and Health*. Purdue University photo/Mark Simons

Frequent abuse by a parent can increase a child's cancer risk in adulthood, and the effects are especially significant when mothers abuse their daughters and fathers abuse their sons, according to new research from Purdue University.

"People often say that children are resilient and they'll bounce back, but

we found that there are events that can have long-term consequences on adult health," said Kenneth Ferraro, distinguished professor of sociology and director of Purdue's Center on Aging and the Life Course. "In this case, people who were frequently emotionally or physically abused by their parents were more likely to have cancer in adulthood, and the link was greater when fathers abused sons and mothers abused daughters. Overall, the more frequent and intense the [abuse](#), the more it elevated the cancer risk.

"We would like to see child abuse noted as an [environmental factor](#) that can increase cancer occurrence in adulthood. More research on this topic also could help mediate the effects or improve interventions to help abused children."

The research, which was conducted with sociology and gerontology graduate student Patricia Morton, was funded by the National Institute on Aging and is published online by the [Journal of Aging and Health](#).

"We started examining a variety of childhood misfortunes, including abuse, and when these were all combined, we found that men with the most [stressors](#) during childhood were more likely to develop cancer," Morton said. "Second, we found that when children were abused by their same-sex parent, it increased their [cancer risk](#)."

The researchers can't say exactly why that is, but a possible reason is the effect of the greater social bond between same-sex children and parents.

"Other studies have shown that if a mother smokes, the daughter is more likely to smoke, and the same relationship is found when sons mirror their father's behavior," Morton said. "More research is needed, but another possibility is that men may be more likely to physically abuse their sons, and mothers are more likely to physically abuse their daughters."

The study's findings were based on survey data from 2,101 adults in two waves of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States. Abuse was one of many childhood misfortunes - including poverty, loss of parent and family educational status - that researchers examined to determine if there was a link to cancer in adulthood. In the first analysis, the research team found that men who experienced the most cumulative stressors during childhood were more likely to have cancer. This was not true with women, and this suggests that men and women may have different responses to childhood stressors, Morton said.

The second analysis looked at each category of misfortune, and this is where the connection between abuse and cancer was revealed. Survey participants were not directly asked if they were abused, but abuse was defined by survey answers to questions such as how frequently a parent, sibling or other person insulted or swore at them as a child; refused to talk them; threatened to hit them; pushed, grabbed or shoved; threw something at them; kicked, bit or hit them with a fist; choked them; or burned or scalded them. The frequency of these abuses also was identified. The link was still there when controlled for the adults' age, lifestyle choices and economic status, but the researchers would like to look closer at these mechanisms.

"It also is likely," Ferraro said, "that the effect between child abuse and cancer is underrepresented in our study, because people who suffered abuse and were then incarcerated, placed in a mental institution or died were not included in this survey of adults. These groups may represent people with more acute and severe effects from abuse, and even though they are omitted, we still find a link."

The researchers are now examining potential links between [child abuse](#) and other health outcomes, including heart attacks and types of [cancer](#).

"The connection between negative childhood events and mental health is accepted, and these findings reinforce that such events can also have a long-lasting effect on a person's physical health," Morton said. "It's shocking just how much the damage sticks, and it is a reminder that childhood, which is defined by rapidly changing biological systems, is a sensitive period of development."

In addition to Morton and Ferraro, Markus Schafer, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Toronto and former Purdue graduate student, also participated on the research team. The National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States is sponsored by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Network on Successful Midlife Development.

More information: Does Childhood Misfortune Increase Cancer Risk in Adulthood? Patricia M. Morton, Markus H. Schafer and Kenneth F. Ferraro

ABSTRACT

Objective: To address the inconsistent findings on whether childhood misfortune increases adult cancer occurrence. **Methods:** This study uses longitudinal data from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) that first sampled 3,032 respondents aged 25 to 74 during 1995-1996. A series of logistic regressions were estimated separately for men and women to test whether the effect of childhood misfortune on adult cancer was largely cumulative or specific to the type or profile of misfortune. **Results:** For men, additive childhood misfortune, physical abuse by father, and frequent abuse by either parent increased cancer risk. For women, physical abuse by mother and frequent abuse by either parent increased cancer risk. **Discussion:** Analyses reveal the importance of examining alternative specifications of childhood misfortune for men and women. Additive childhood misfortune predicted cancer for men only, whereas child abuse by parent

of the same sex predicted cancer for men and women.

Provided by Purdue University

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