

Middle-aged women who were child abuse victims at increased risk for heart disease, diabetes

July 11 2012

Middle-aged women who report having been physically abused as children are about two times more likely than other women their age to have high blood pressure, high blood sugar, a larger waistline and poor cholesterol levels, according to a new study published by the American Psychological Association.

These women are diagnosed as having metabolic syndrome which, according to previous research, places them at an increased risk of developing heart disease and Type 2 diabetes. This link between physical abuse and metabolic syndrome persisted beyond traditional risk factors, suggesting physical abuse is a unique factor in women's cardiovascular health, according to the study. It is the first study to show that a history of childhood physical abuse is related to the development of metabolic syndrome in women at mid-life, according to the authors. It was published online in the APA journal *Health Psychology*.

"Our research shows us that childhood abuse can have long-lasting consequences, even decades later, on women's health and is related to more health problems down the road," said study co-author Aimee Midei, MS, from the University of Pittsburgh.

Participants in the study were 342 women, 113 black and the remainder white, from the Pittsburgh area. They were between the ages of 42 and 52 when the study began. Each completed a [childhood trauma](#)

questionnaire that assessed past physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Approximately 34 percent of the participants reported experiencing some type of childhood abuse.

Metabolic syndrome was identified by measuring the women's [waist circumference](#), [cholesterol levels](#), blood pressure and [fasting glucose levels](#) annually during the seven-year study. Other traditional risk factors for metabolic syndrome were also assessed, such as smoking, physical activity, menopause, alcohol use, depressive symptoms and childhood and adult socioeconomic status. At baseline, 60 women were diagnosed with metabolic syndrome and 59 more were identified over the course of the study.

Results showed that physical abuse was strongly associated with metabolic syndrome, even after controlling for ethnicity, age, menopause and other traditional risk factors. Sexual abuse and emotional abuse were unrelated to metabolic syndrome, according to the findings.

The authors further examined individual components of the [metabolic syndrome](#) and found that physical abuse was particularly associated with larger waist circumference and fasting glucose, both of which are precursors to Type 2 diabetes. "It's possible that women with histories of physical abuse engage in unhealthy eating behaviors or have poor stress regulation," said Midei. "It appears that psychology plays a role in physical health even when we're talking about traumatic incidents that happened when these women were children."

More information: "Childhood Physical Abuse Is Associated With Incident Metabolic Syndrome in Mid-Life Women," Aimee J. Midei, MS, Karen A. Matthews, PhD, Yue-Fang Chang, PhD, and Joyce T. Bromberger, PhD; *Health Psychology*, online.

Provided by American Psychological Association

Citation: Middle-aged women who were child abuse victims at increased risk for heart disease, diabetes (2012, July 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from

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