

Childhood adversity linked to higher risk of early death

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Traumatic childhood experiences are linked to an increased risk of early death, according to new research using data from the 1958 National Child Development Study.

The research, led by the French National Institute of Health and Medical Research (INSERM), in collaboration with the ESRC International Centre for Lifecourse Studies in Society and Health at UCL, found that men and women who had suffered adversity in childhood were more likely to die before age of 50 than those who had not.

The researchers compared premature death rates among more than 15,000 people to their experiences of adversity at ages 7, 11 and 16. This included spending time in care, suffering from neglect, parental separation or having a family member in prison.

For women, the likelihood of dying before age 50 increased with the amount of adversity they had suffered in childhood. Women who had suffered one [negative experience](#) by age 16 were 66 per cent more likely to die before the age of 50 than those who had not faced any adversity. Women who had two or more adverse experiences in childhood had an 80 per cent increased risk of premature death.

Men who had suffered two or more traumatic events in childhood were 57 per cent more likely to die by the time they were 50 than those who had not experienced any adversity growing up.

The association between childhood adversity and premature death remained even after taking into account factors such as [education level](#) and social class, alcohol and [tobacco use](#), and psychological problems in [early adulthood](#).

The researchers note that some causes of death in early [adult life](#) are related to [mental stress](#), such as suicide or addiction to alcohol or drugs. However, they also suggest that children who suffer severe stress may experience imbalances in their hormone and immune systems that impact on their physical development and later health.

For the first time in any study, the longitudinal nature of the data made it possible to link the risk of early death to experiences of adversity that have been recorded during childhood, rather than relying on adult recollections of early life experiences.

Professor Mel Bartley, one of the UCL authors of the study, says: "Our

Centre has been collaborating with public health researchers at INSERM to enable them to use unique British birth cohort data to test their ideas.

"This work on early psychological trauma and [premature death](#) adds a whole new dimension to public health. It shows that if we are going to ensure better health in the population the work needs to begin early in life to support children experiencing severe adversities. Many people have suspected this but until now we have not had such high quality evidence from such a large cohort of people."

Provided by University College London

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