

# Growing up poor impacts physical and mental health in young adults

June 25 2014, by Stephanie Stephens

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Socioeconomic adversity during childhood increases the likelihood of both depression and higher body mass index (BMI) in early adolescence, which can worsen and lead to illness for young adults, according to a new report in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

"Certain stresses manifest through increases in poor physical [health](#), as shown by an increasing BMI over adolescence, or through worsening mental health, as shown by increases in depressive symptoms. These developments contribute to young adult [physical health](#)," said Kwon.

"As subscribers to the 'life course' theory, we know experiences in early life affect you later—even if they're latent for a while—and that these

stresses can be compounded," said Josephine Kwon, M.S., of the department of human development and family science at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Kwon and her co-authors used data obtained from more than 12,000 adolescents, ages 12 to 19 years enrolled in the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health on four different occasions, or waves, between 1995 and 2001.

They measured total socioeconomic adversity by weighing factors such as average parental education, family economic hardship, family make-up and employment status. They measured health effects by calculating BMI, assessing depressive symptoms and self-rated [general health](#) and by counting the occurrence of eight physician-diagnosed diseases or health problems during the final years of the study.

They found that adolescents with more socioeconomic adversities had more depressive symptoms and higher BMIs initially and had worse trajectories over time. Higher levels and growth of depression and BMI were associated with higher counts of young adult physical illnesses and worse self-rated general health. Kwon and her colleagues also looked at specific biomarkers of health, like blood pressure.

While socioeconomic adversity was not directly correlated with physical illness or general health, the trajectories of growth in depressive symptoms and BMI appear to carry influence. Growth in [depressive symptoms](#) were predictive of the incidence of sexually transmitted infections while growth in BMI was associated with several health risk measures, including blood pressure, blood glucose, and overall health rating.

Kwon called for the development of "a multi-faceted program that addresses nutrition and can improve adolescent BMI, as well as address

the psychological consequences of growing up poor. Our work suggests that examining early childhood socioeconomic conditions may be just as important identifying at-risk adolescents."

"We are learning more and more about the far-reaching implications of early adverse life experiences on health," says Penny Gordon Larsen, Ph.D., a professor in the department of nutrition at the Gillings School of Global Public Health at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. "This paper examines early adolescence as a risk period for health outcomes in young adulthood. We know from other research that the period between early adolescence and young adulthood is a sensitive period for weight gain that has adverse effects on cardiovascular health later in life."

**More information:** Wickrama, Ph.D., Josephine A. Kwon, M.S., Assaf Oshri, Ph.D., and Tae Kyoung Lee, M.S. 2014." Early Socioeconomic Adversity and Young Adult Physical Illness: The Role of Body Mass Index and Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Adolescent Health*. DOI: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.04.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.04.006)

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