

Intervention needed for survivors of childhood burns

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Adults who have been hospitalized for a burn as a child experience higher than usual rates of depression and suicidal thoughts, according to new research at the University of Adelaide.

A 30-year follow up of childhood [burns](#) victims has been conducted by the University's Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies. They found that 42% of people surveyed had suffered some form of mental illness and 30% suffered [depression](#) at some stage in their lives.

The results, now published in the journal *Burns*, also found that long-term depression was an issue among the group, and 11% had attempted suicide.

"Some of these results are concerning, particularly the rates of prolonged episodes of depression and suicide attempts, which are at a level higher than you would expect to find in the general population," says Dr Miranda van Hooff, Research Manager with the University's Centre for Traumatic Stress Studies.

"This research demonstrates that being hospitalized for a burn during childhood places that child in an increased risk group. They require further, long-term follow up beyond the medical attention received for their burns," she says.

The survey looked at 272 people who were hospitalized for burns during childhood from 1980-1990. Scalds accounted for 58% of the burns,

while 17% were flame burns. The severity of the burns ranged from 1-80% of their bodies.

Dr van Hooff says although the burns themselves can be an important factor in these cases, many people surveyed did not directly link the burn with their current emotional wellbeing.

"We found that it's not often the burn itself that has affected people but some other lifetime traumatic event. Half of the participants stated clearly in the survey that their personal distress was not related to their burns," she says.

"Our centre's work on the victims of Australia's Ash Wednesday bushfires has shown that many people affected by such a tragedy develop a heightened sensitivity to trauma. We suspect that this may be the same among the childhood [burns victims](#), so that while the memory of the burn itself may have faded with time, they have become more susceptible to mental trauma or the negative effects of additional trauma.

"Our main concern is in ensuring that this group of people receives the long-term follow up and care they need, because they are at increased risk of depression and [suicidal thoughts](#)," she says.

Provided by University of Adelaide

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