

# More than one third of adults have multiple health problems in midlife

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More than one in three British adults are suffering from two or more chronic health conditions in middle age, such as recurrent back problems, mental ill-health, high blood pressure, diabetes, and high-risk

drinking, according to UCL researchers.

The new study, published in *BMC Public Health*, shows that among Generation X—adults born in 1970—those who grew up in poorer families are at much greater risk of having multiple long-term [health](#) problems in their late 40s. The research also reveals an association between physical and mental health conditions in childhood and adolescence, and chronic health problems in [middle age](#).

Lead author, Dr. Dawid Gondek (UCL Department of Epidemiology & Public Health) said: "This study provides concerning new evidence about the state of the nation's health in midlife. It shows that a substantial proportion of the population are already suffering from multiple long-term physical and mental health problems in their late 40s, and also points to stark health inequalities which appear to begin early in childhood."

The researchers analyzed data collected from a nationally representative group of around 8,000 British adults who have participated in the 1970 British Cohort Study (BCS70) since they were born, more than 50 years ago. At age 46-48, in 2016-18, they took part in a biomedical survey, where nurses measured their blood pressure and took a blood sample to check for diabetes. Participants were asked to report whether they had various chronic physical health conditions, such as recurrent back problems, asthma, heart problems, and arthritis. Mental health and high-risk drinking were also assessed, using separate questionnaires.

At age 46–48, 34% of adults had multiple chronic health problems, with more than a quarter (26%) engaged in high-risk drinking, more than one in five (21%) reporting recurrent back issues, and just under a fifth (19%) experiencing mental health problems. One in six (16%) had [high blood pressure](#), more than one in 10 (12%) were suffering from asthma or bronchitis, one in 13 (8%) had arthritis and one in 20 (5%) had

diabetes in midlife.

The study also revealed the most common combinations of [chronic health conditions](#) experienced by adults in middle age. More than 4% had mental ill-health and high blood pressure, 3% suffered from [mental health problems](#) and asthma, 2.5% had mental ill-health and arthritis and 2% had diabetes and high blood pressure.

The research team used the rich longitudinal data collected from study participants throughout their lives to investigate the links between family background, cognitive development and health in childhood and adolescence, and physical and mental health in midlife.

They found that adults from the poorest families were at 43% greater risk of having multiple long-term health conditions in midlife compared to those from the most privileged families. They had almost three and half times higher risk of suffering from mental ill-health and arthritis, and around three times the risk of having poor mental health and high blood pressure in their late 40s.

Lower birthweight, higher body mass index and lower cognitive ability at age 10, and worse emotional and conduct issues at age 16 were all linked with increased risk of having multiple chronic health problems in middle age.

Dr. Gondek said: "Compared to previous generations, it appears that the health of British adults in midlife is on the decline. With earlier studies finding links between poor health in adulthood and lower life satisfaction, lower earnings and early retirement, [public health](#) guidance should focus on helping the population improve their health in midlife so they can age better, stay economically active and continue to lead fulfilling lives."

Professor George Ploubidis (UCL Center for Longitudinal Studies) added: "Thanks to longitudinal data collected from across five decades of our study participants' lives, we can show the long-lasting links between childhood and adolescence and midlife health. We found that adults from the most disadvantaged backgrounds, those who had been overweight or obese as children and those who had experienced mental ill-health as teenagers were all at increased risk of poor health later on.

"If these links reflect causal effects, policy and practice targeting these core areas in childhood and adolescence may improve the health of future generations and alleviate potential pressures on the NHS."

As this is an observational study, researchers did not control what the participants were exposed to. Instead, they observed what happened to the different groups of people without intervening. The authors were able to use detailed data to account for a range of factors that may have influenced the link between early life characteristics and [midlife](#) health. However, it would be impossible to rule out every influence with absolute certainty.

**More information:** Dawid Gondek et al, Prevalence and early-life determinants of mid-life multimorbidity: evidence from the 1970 British birth cohort, *BMC Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-021-11291-w](#)

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