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Abuse during childhood linked to adult-onset asthma in African-American women

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According to a new study from the Slone Epidemiology Center (SEC) at Boston University, African-American women who reported suffering abuse before age 11 had a greater likelihood of adult-onset asthma compared to women whose childhood and adolescence were free of abuse.

The study, which is published online in the Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology, was led by Patricia Coogan, DSc, senior epidemiologist at SEC and associate professor of epidemiology at the Boston University School of Public Health.

This study followed 28,456 African-American women, all of whom are participants in the Black Women's Health Study, between 1995-2011. They completed health questionnaires and provided information on physical and sexual abuse during childhood up to age 11 and adolescence, ages 12-18.

The results indicate that the incidence of adult-onset asthma was increased by more than 20 percent among women who had been abused during childhood. The evidence was stronger for physical abuse than for sexual abuse. There was little indication, however, that abuse during adolescence was associated with the risk of adult-onset asthma.

"This is the first prospective study to show an association between childhood abuse and adult-onset asthma," said Coogan. "The results suggest that chronic stress contributes to asthma onset, even years later."

The hypothesized mechanism linking childhood abuse to asthma incidence is stress and its physiological consequences, particularly effects on the immune system and on airway development.

According to 2010 statistics from the United States Department of Health and Human Service's (HHS) National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, approximately 695,000 children aged 0-17 were identified as neglected or abused by state Child Protective Service agencies, and 22 percent of neglected or abused children were African-American. National statistics show that asthma is more prevalent in African-Americans.

"Given the high prevalence of asthma and of childhood abuse in the United States, the association is of significant public health importance," Coogan added.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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