

Trauma in childhood linked to drug use in adolescence

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Latest research from a national sample of almost 10,000 U.S. adolescents found psychological trauma, especially abuse and domestic violence before age 11, can increase the likelihood of experimentation with drugs in adolescence, independent of a history of mental illness. Results of the study conducted at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health are published online in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

This is the first study to document these associations in a national sample of adolescents.

The research, led by Mailman School of Public Health postdoctoral fellow Hannah Carliner and Associate Professor Silvia S. Martins, MD, PhD, found that [childhood trauma](#) experiences before age 11 increased the chances that teens would try marijuana, cocaine, [prescription drugs](#) used without a medical reason, other drugs, and multiple drugs. They also showed that a greater number of [traumatic experiences](#) were associated with an increase in risk for use of marijuana and other drugs.

"Abuse and [domestic violence](#) were particularly harmful to children, increasing the chances of all types of drug use in the adolescent years", says Dr. Carliner. "We also found that trauma such as car accidents, natural disasters, and major illness in childhood increased the chances that teens would use marijuana, cocaine, and prescription drugs."

Adolescents with a parent who misused alcohol or drugs were more

likely to use marijuana and other drugs following exposure to some forms of childhood trauma. "Parent substance misuse may increase access to drugs in the home, indicate a biological predisposition towards drug use, serve as a model for coping with stress, or indicate lack of parental involvement or neglect," noted Dr. Martins. "Future research should identify which mechanisms may increase this risk in order to target interventions."

Adolescent drug use may be a precursor to harmful drug use, [mental illness](#), and other problematic health behaviors in adulthood, therefore "targeting this modifiable health behavior in adolescence may help halt the trajectory towards the plethora of poor social and health outcomes often associated with childhood trauma," according to Dr. Martins. This research can also inform clinical practice because it shows that adolescents with a trauma history are a high-risk group for illicit [drug](#) use and may benefit from prevention efforts that specifically address traumatic memories and coping strategies for dealing with stressful life events.

"Drug treatment programs should consider specifically addressing the psychological harm caused by traumatic experiences in childhood, and developing less harmful active-coping strategies for dealing with current stress and traumatic memories among adolescents," points out Dr. Carliner. "Such early intervention during this critical period of adolescence could have broad benefits to the health and well-being of adults."

Provided by Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health

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