

Childhood Abuse Associated with High Cholesterol in Adulthood

By: Avery St. Onge, Integrative Practitioner



Risk factors for heart disease and stroke were higher for adults who endured childhood abuse, a recent study found.

The study, published in the *Journal of the American Heart Association*, was led by Liliana Aguayo, PhD, MPH, social epidemiologist, and research assistant professor at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health in Atlanta. The researchers set out to investigate four cardiovascular disease risk factors in adulthood, and how and if they relate experiences of childhood abuse.

The study used data from a long-term study called Coronary Artery Risk Development in Young Adults (CARDIA). The CARDIA study involved 5,115 Black and white adults who were enrolled from 1985/1986 to 2015/2016. Participants received initial care evaluations and a total of eight additional examinations over the course of 30 years. All participants filled out a survey which asked questions about how often their guardian abused them, how often their guardian nurtured them, and how organized their childhood households were.

The results of the study showed that approximately 30 percent of participants experienced "occasional/frequent abuse," 20 percent of participants reported abuse "little or some of the time," and 50 percent of participants reported no childhood abuse and described their family as nurturing and well-managed.

The study found risk of high cholesterol was 26 percent higher among women, and 35 percent higher among white men who described low levels of childhood abuse in the survey, than those who reported no childhood abuse. White men who reported occasional/frequent levels of abuse during their childhood, had an 81 percent higher risk of developing type 2 diabetes than adults who experienced no childhood abuse. Black men and white women who described their homes as dysfunctional and reported abuse were 3.5 times more likely to develop high cholesterol in comparison to those who said they had a well-organized childhood household. Cardiovascular

disease risk factors were not higher among Black women who reported experiencing childhood abuse, according to researchers.

The study suggests that childhood experiences may play a role in shaping the cardiovascular health of adults.

“Further research is needed to better understand the potential mechanisms linking childhood abuse and family environment to higher heart disease risk factors, as well as the impact of structural racism and social determinants of health, which likely influenced the differences we found by race and sex,” Aguayo said. “This information is critical to strengthening cardiovascular disease prevention interventions and policies, particularly those that focus on people who experienced abuse or other trauma during childhood.”

About the Author:



Avery St. Onge is the Associate Editor of Integrative Practitioner. She’s a recent graduate from The George Washington University where she studied journalism and mass communications. During her time at GWU, she focused her reporting on health and wellness. She wrote articles and produced podcasts and videos about topics such as technological advancements in medicine and flaws within college health centers. As a Type 1 diabetic, she is hyperaware of the benefits of a holistic, mind/body approach to medical treatments and is committed to sharing the latest news in integrative medicine.