

# Childhood Trauma in Mothers Affects Health of Future Children

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Mothers who experienced adverse childhood experiences were more likely to report that their own children suffered from certain health problems, including asthma, according to a recent study.

Mothers who experience trauma or abuse early on as a child, during pregnancy, and after birth are more likely to have children with multiple health problems, such as [asthma](#), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and autism, according to a recent study.

The results of the analysis were published in [\*The Lancet Public Health\*](#).<sup>1</sup>

“To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine multiple health problems at once in relation to early trauma in mothers in a large, sociodemographically and ethnically diverse sample,” said the study’s lead author, Nora K. Moog, PhD, Institute of Medical Psychology at Charité in Germany, in a [statement](#).<sup>2</sup> “That has been done primarily for individual diseases in the past.”

Data for the study came from the [Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes \(ECHO\) Program](#), a 7-year National Institutes of Health initiative that began in 2016 to focus on key areas of pediatric development that have a high public health impact.

The sample included 4337 mothers and their children living in the United State, from 21 of the 69 long-term ECHO cohorts. The mothers were asked to report on their own childhood experiences using the adverse childhood experiences questionnaire as well as the life stressor checklist. They were also asked to self-report health diagnoses of

their biological children aged 18 or younger, including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, obesity, allergy, and asthma diagnoses.

Of the 3954 mothers included in this study, 1742 (44%) had experienced abuse or neglect as a child.

Children of mothers who reported adverse childhood experiences (physical, emotional, or sexual abuse) had a higher risk of having a child with asthma (odds ratio, OR, 1.54; 95% CI, 1.34-1.77;  $P < .0001$ ).

Additionally, these mothers had a higher risk of having a child with internalizing problems in the clinical range, such as anxiety and depression (OR, 2.70; 95% CI, 1.95-3.72;  $P < .0001$ ), autism spectrum disorder (OR, 1.70; 95% CI, 1.13-2.55;  $P = .01$ ), and ADHD (OR, 2.09; 95% CI, 1.63-2.67;  $P < .0001$ ).

In a finding the authors called "novel," daughters of mothers with adverse experiences were more likely to be obese (OR, 1.69; 95% CI, 1.17-2.44;  $P = .05$ ) than sons.

The researchers believe that more research needs to be done to better understand the exact mechanisms by which health risks are passed to the next generation. Furthermore, the researchers plan to conduct a follow-up study on which children remain resilient and unaffected by unmet social needs of their parent, and why that is.

Although the researchers have not yet discovered the mechanisms behind the passing of health outcomes to the next generation, they believe that this analysis provides evidence that adverse childhood experiences may affect maternal biology during pregnancy. Screening for pregnant mothers for adverse childhood experiences may prevent the development of health problems among their children, and the study supports the need for early intervention, the authors said.

“I assume that appropriate support for mothers who suffer from the consequences of childhood maltreatment can have a positive effect on their health and well-being and that of their children,” said head researcher, Claudia Buss, PhD, a professor at the Institute of Medical Psychology at Charité and adjunct professor at the Department of Pediatrics at the University of California Irvine, in a [statement](#). “That means it's very important to identify these mothers and children early on.”

## Reference

1. Moog NK, Cummings PD, Jackson KL, et al. Intergenerational transmission of the effects of maternal exposure to childhood maltreatment in the USA: A retrospective cohort study. *The Lancet Public Health*. 2023;8(3). doi:10.1016/s2468-2667(23)00025-7
2. The far-reaching consequences of child abuse. Charité - Universitätsmedizin Berlin. <https://www.eurekalert.org/news-releases/980822>. Published February 24, 2023. Accessed March 1, 2023.