

Link between childhood maltreatment and adult substance abuse



Addressing childhood maltreatment could prevent alcohol and substance use disorders later in life. Image: Adobe.

University of Queensland (UQ) researchers have found people maltreated as children are 3 times more likely to be admitted to hospital for alcohol and substance use by the time they're 40, compared to people who were not maltreated.

Dr Claudia Bull from UQ's Faculty of Medicine led a study which analysed data from more than 6,000 children born in Brisbane's Mater Mother's Hospital between 1981 and 1983.

"This longitudinal birth cohort study gathered and analysed the group's data at different stages of their lives, from 6-months-old to 40 years," Dr Bull said.

"In 2000, we combined this information with additional data from the Queensland Department of Families, Youth and Community Care and found around 600 of the children were identified as maltreated.

"For the purposes of this study maltreatment, was defined as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse or neglect up to the age of 15, as reported to the department.

"We found those children were 2.86 times more likely to be hospitalised for alcohol use disorder as adults compared to children who weren't maltreated, and 3.34 times more likely to be admitted for a substance use disorder."

Dr Bull said previous research into childhood adversity and alcohol and substance use disorders had focused mainly on physical and sexual abuse.

"But we particularly wanted to know whether emotional abuse and neglect were as strongly associated with subsequent alcohol and substance use disorders," she said.

"And we found they were."

Co-author Professor Steve Kisely said the odds of hospital admission for alcohol and substance use disorders are comparable across all subtypes of abuse and neglect in childhood.

"It means no matter what kind of abuse children face – physical, sexual or emotional – they are roughly 3 times as likely to suffer from alcohol and substance use disorders later in life," Professor Kisely said.

“This shows that by addressing the root causes and consequence of child maltreatment, we have the opportunity to prevent many people suffering from alcohol and substance use disorders in later life.”

The research was funded by the Metro South Research Support Scheme and supported by the ALIVE National Centre for Mental Health Research Translation.

The [research paper](#) was published in *Addiction*. – [www.uq.edu.au/news/April 19, 2024](http://www.uq.edu.au/news/April%2019,%202024)