

Childhood trauma can harm health for life

by University of Georgia, USA



Negative childhood experiences can potentially lead to lifelong physical health challenges, according to new UGA research. Credit: Kaiya Plagenhoef

Adverse experiences and environments in childhood may cause a chain reaction of mental and physical health problems later in life, according to new University of Georgia (UGA) research.

The study suggests growing up with negative events and in dangerous communities in early adolescence can alter an entire lifetime, particularly for Black men and women.

"Things that happen to you in childhood—from how you're raised as a child to the environment that you're in—can lead to long-standing issues," said Sierra Carter, co-author of the study and the new associate director of UGA's Center for Family Research in USA.

The findings are published in the journal *Development and Psychopathology*.

Unfavorable environments, treatment in childhoods influence substance use

The researchers relied on data from the UGA-led Family and Community Health Study. Beginning in 1996, the ongoing study follows more than 800 families, all of which had a fifth grader at the start of the study. The researchers reinterview participants every two to three years.

The present study found that starting at age 10, children were already able to register when their environments and treatment around them were unsafe.

Unsafe community environments affected not only the way the children acted but also created a physical, inflammatory response in their central nervous system.

Later in young adulthood, these stressors on both body and mind translated to earlier and more frequent use of substances as a way of self-medicating.

"We found a lag with these background childhood experiences and drinking," said Steven Beach, corresponding author of the study and director of the Center for Family Research.

"Once kids moved out of the protective environment of their homes, the delayed inflammatory responses had a chance to emerge and influence their behavior in a bigger way, setting the stage for elevated alcohol consumption."

Alcohol misuse causes lasting physical consequences

The consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol over time created measurable health complications in adulthood for participants in the study.

Those who reported drinking heavily as young adults were at higher risk of heart problems as they got older.

Additionally, those 29-year-olds had worse aging outcomes as a result of this drinking, meaning there was a possibly shorter life expectancy, and faster signs of aging across numerous body systems.

This effect of alcohol on aging was especially pronounced for women.

Dangerous childhoods have disproportionate effect on Black men, women

The repercussions of adverse childhoods were compounded for Black men and women, largely due to the added effects of discrimination in childhood.

"Being exposed to racial discrimination puts you at risk for early alcohol use, which then puts you at risk for later alcohol use and other diseases down the road," Carter said. "That's a well-established pathway that gets people on this difficult trajectory."

Black participants who experienced racism in early life were more likely to binge drink and experience cardiac issues and faster aging in their appearance and body functionality.

"I firmly believe that we can do better than we currently are in terms of protecting children in a whole variety of ways," Beach said. "It's just really important for us to think about the delayed effects of childhood experiences that carry forward and have an impact on life."

"This study also underscores the likely payoff of investments in children and building strong, safe communities. If we can intervene early, if we can support kids, the payoffs are likely to not just be immediate. They're likely to be very long lasting, all the way out through adulthood."

More information: Steven R.H. Beach et al, Childhood exposure to danger increases Black youths' alcohol consumption, accelerated aging, and cardiac risk as young adults: A test of the incubation hypothesis, *Development and Psychopathology* (2025). DOI: [10.1017/S0954579425000264](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579425000264)

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