

PRESS RELEASE

Childhood Trauma Linked to Higher Risk of Developing Physical Disease

- *People who experienced traumatic events during childhood are 1.5 times more likely to develop physical illnesses than the general population.*
- *The association is strongest in cases of bullying, physical or sexual abuse, and parental loss or abandonment, according to a study led by the Hospital del Mar Research Institute that analyzed data from 250 published studies on the subject up to April 2025.*
- *The findings may help draw attention to the possible causes of a wide range of physical diseases and reinforce efforts to prevent childhood trauma*

Barcelona, July 14, 2026 – It is estimated that 60% of adults have experienced adverse events during childhood. At the same time, it is well established that exposure to such experiences in the early years of life triples the risk of developing a mental disorder in adulthood. However, no comprehensive review of the published evidence had yet examined whether a similar relationship exists **between childhood trauma and the risk of developing physical, or somatic, illnesses** later in life. Now, a study by the Hospital del Mar Research Institute (HMRIB), published in *eClinicalMedicine*, a journal of *The Lancet* group, reveals a clear link between trauma experienced during childhood and adolescence and an increased risk of conditions such as diabetes, migraine, and cardiovascular disease in adulthood.

This ambitious study analyzed data from all research on the topic published worldwide up to April 2025. In total, it included 36 reviews covering 250 studies and data from more than six million individuals. The conclusion is clear, according to Dr. Benedikt Amann, senior author of the analysis, researcher in the Mental Health Research Group at HMRIB and at the CIBER Mental Health Network (CIBERSAM): **“These findings allow us to propose that traumatic experiences during childhood play a role in the origin of these diseases. We can say that people who have experienced childhood trauma are more likely to develop a somatic illness.”**

Links to Migraine, Diabetes and Cardiovascular Disease

The study examined the relationship between various types of childhood trauma and **fifteen highly prevalent diseases**. These included autoimmune and cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, irritable bowel syndrome, and HIV, among others. A strong association was found between experiencing any type of childhood trauma and all of these conditions. The results indicate that individuals exposed to traumatic experiences during childhood and adolescence have a **1.57-fold higher risk of developing any of the somatic diseases analyzed**. The strongest associations were observed for experiences involving abuse of any kind, physical or sexual abuse, and bullying.

Among specific diseases, a **particularly strong correlation was identified between bullying and migraine**. Individuals who experienced bullying were found to be twice as likely to suffer from migraines in adulthood. **“There is also a clear association between sexual abuse and obesity, with a 1.45-fold increased risk, and between obesity and parental separation or death, with a 1.58-fold increased risk,”** explains Dr. Alicia Valiente, first author of the study and researcher at the Hospital del Mar Research Institute. **Overall, exposure to any form of abuse showed strong correlations with conditions such as migraine, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease.** The study also found that women who experienced any type of trauma—particularly sexual or physical abuse—had a higher risk than men of developing physical illnesses.

These findings have important implications for the mortality and morbidity of individuals who experienced trauma during the first years of life. As a result, Dr. Amann emphasizes **“the need to make the prevention of childhood trauma a political and social priority because of its impact on both society and health.”** He adds: **“Childhood trauma must be detected early and addressed through trauma-focused interventions. This should be accompanied by social and political efforts aimed at prevention and by streamlining referral pathways so that patients can receive therapies that address the root causes of their mental health problems. These therapies should be specifically focused on traumatic experiences.”** In this regard, he highlights the importance of strengthening collaboration among healthcare professionals to improve the detection of trauma and facilitate referrals to mental health specialists.

The study did not investigate the mechanisms linking childhood trauma and physical disease in adulthood. However, the authors suggest that traumatic experiences may negatively affect psychosocial development, influencing lifestyle and health-related habits and potentially leading to behaviors that increase disease risk. In addition, mental disorders themselves may have long-term effects on physical health. Importantly, the researchers did not establish a causal relationship between childhood trauma and somatic disease, but rather an association between the two.

The study involved researchers from the **University of Rio Grande do Sul** and **Hospital Clínicas de Porto Alegre** (Brazil), **Pompeu Fabra University** (Spain), the **University of Munich** (Germany), and the **University of Pavia** (Italy).

Reference Article

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More information

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