TuSalud

Childhood Stress Linked to Poorer Heart Health in Adults

High rates of stress during adolescence can increase the risk of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes in adulthood.

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In young adults, high levels of stress during their teenage years to adulthood may increase the risk of high blood pressure, obesity and other risk factors for cardiovascular disease compared with those who reported less stress, according to a study published in the Journal of the American Heart Association.

Stress can negatively impact heart health and give rise to increased blood pressure, heart rate and inflammation, which may advance to chronic diseases, according to the American Heart Association (AHA). Studies have shown that Latinos have an increased risk of having a heart attack due to high rates of obesity, high blood pressure and diabetes.

The study focused on cardiometabolic risk factors, such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, type 2 diabetes and obesity.

Childhood obesity affects nearly one in five U.S. children and teens, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Latino and Black youth experience high rates of obesity, which research attributes to poverty, lack of access to healthy foods and single-parent households, among other factors.

A 2017 AHA report found that childhood adversities, including stress, affect cardiometabolic health throughout one's lifetime.

"Understanding the effects of perceived stress starting in childhood is important for preventing, lessening or managing higher cardiometabolic risk factors in young adults," said study author Fangqi Guo, PhD, a postdoctoral research fellow at Keck School of Medicine at the University of Southern California, in an AHA press release about the study.

Researchers reviewed data on 276 children and young adults from Southern California. About 56% of participants were girls or women, and almost half of the study participants identified as Latino, according to the AHA news release. At the start of the study, the average participant age was 13 years. During follow-up assessments, participants were 24 years, on average.

Guo and colleagues asked study participants to use a four-item Perceived Stress Scale to rate the stress they experienced the previous month.

Those who experienced high stress during adolescence through adulthood were more likely to have a greater risk of cardiometabolic diseases in young adulthood. What's more, teenagers with high levels of stress that lasted into adulthood were more likely to have worse vascular health, increased total body fat and obesity compared to those with less stress.

"Although we assumed that perceived stress patterns should have some association with cardiometabolic measures, we did not expect such consistent patterns across various risk factors," Guo said.

The findings "could highlight the importance of stress management as early as in adolescence as a health protective behavior," the researchers concluded.

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