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DEEP BREATH

# Disease linked to childhood stress

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According to a new Harvard study that followed 6,700 Britons from age 7 to 45, lifelong distress takes more of a health toll than being stressed in either childhood or adulthood. But if you have to endure distress during just one period, childhood is a more vulnerable time.

Childhood distress may be particularly important because that's when people are learning how to control their emotions, said

Ashley Winning, a postdoctoral research fellow and social epidemiologist at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health, who was the first author on the study.

Early stress also causes physiological changes, including changes to the immune system, that may be difficult to reverse later, Winning said.

Most previous studies asked middle-age people to recall whether they were stressed as children. The new study is more powerful because it includes interviews with volunteers along the way — at ages 7, 11, 16, 23, 33, and 42. It also looked for signs of developing heart disease in the blood of 42-year-olds.

That researchers were able to see the result of childhood distress in a blood test so many years later is “remarkable,” said Alison Holman, a health psychologist and interim director of the program in nursing science at the University of California,



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Irvine.

Winning's paper confirms the link between stress and disease risk — which other studies have only been able to suggest, said Holman, who was not involved in the work but wrote an [editorial](#) that appeared with it in the October issue of the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. “It adds a lot to the body of research we’ve got,” she said.

What people shouldn't do, Holman said, is conclude that their own or their child's unhappy periods will doom them to heart disease; risk is not destiny, and not all stresses are created equal. A child now fleeing Syria is facing more trauma than virtually all of the kids who live near her in Irvine, she said.

Holman said she hopes that other research will show how best to reverse damage from early stress and whether stresses at different times in childhood matter more.

At the same time, Winning encourages parents and caregivers to take signs of distress in a child seriously.

“Don't think they might grow out of it,” she said, but instead try to help them cope constructively with whatever life throws their way.

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