

BIG NUMBER

Early trauma linked to 48 percent higher chance of serious headaches

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People who experienced trauma as a child or adolescent were found to be 48 percent more likely to have serious and recurrent headaches as an adult than were those who had not experienced trauma in their early years, [according to research published in the journal Neurology](#).

The finding stemmed from the analysis of data from 28 studies, involving 154,739 people.

Overall, nearly a third of the participants (31 percent) reported having experienced a traumatic event at least once before age 18, and 16 percent had been diagnosed as an adult with a [primary headache disorder](#), which means that their headaches (such as migraines, tension or cluster headaches) are the main problem, rather than a symptom of an underlying disease or condition.

The researchers categorized [traumatic events](#) as either threat-based (such as physical, sexual or emotional abuse, witnessing or being threatened by violence, and serious family conflicts) or deprivation-based (including neglect, financial adversity, parents' separation, divorce or death, and living in a household with mental illness, alcohol or substance abuse). Physical abuse, sexual abuse and exposure to family violence were the most commonly reported traumas.

Of those who had experienced at least one traumatic event as a youth, 26 percent subsequently were diagnosed with primary headaches, compared with 12 percent of those who had not experienced trauma.

As the number of traumatic events experienced by a child or adolescent increased, so did the odds of their having headaches later in life. For example, those who had experienced four or more traumatic events were more than twice as likely to have a headache disorder. Also, certain traumas — physical or sexual abuse and neglect — were linked to greater risk for headaches than other types of trauma.

The study found an association between trauma as a youth and headache disorder as an adult, rather than direct proof that one led to the other. But the researchers wrote that traumas experienced as a child or adolescent “are important risk factors for primary headache disorders in adulthood,” which one of the researchers described in a statement released by the American Academy of Neurology as “a risk factor that we cannot ignore.”

This article is part of The Post’s “Big Number” series, which takes a brief look at the statistical aspect of health issues. Additional information and relevant research are available through the hyperlinks.