A large-scale Swedish study shows that persons who were subjected to physical, emotional or sexual abuse during childhood are more prone to becoming overweight as adults.

Subjection to abuse in childhood causes a clear risk for developing obesity as an adult, according to a new study by the Karolinska Institute in Sweden.

The Swedish meta-analysis of 23 cohort studies comprised 112,000 participants. It was recently published in the journal *Obesity Reviews*.

“The study clearly shows that difficult life events leave traces which can manifest as disease much later in life,” says Erik Hemmingsson, a researcher at the Huddinge Department of Medicine who is linked to the Karolinska University Hospital’s Obesity Centre.

**Mental and physical abuse**

Along with his colleagues, he calculated that the risk of obesity is 34 percent higher among adults who were abused as children than among adults who were not.

Split into categories, the study showed that physical abuse during childhood increased the risk of obesity in adulthood by 28 percent, emotional abuse by 36 percent, sexual abuse by 31 percent, and general abuse by 45 percent.

Among those who had been subjected to severe abuse, the risk increased by 50 percent, compared to 13 percent for moderate abuse.

“These findings indicate causality, where the abuse is the cause of the obesity later in life,” explains Erik Hemmingsson. Earlier studies have shown that low self-esteem among children plays a role in the development of obesity in adulthood.

**Appetite and sleep**

How do such traumatic experiences in childhood link with obesity?

One recently published theory is that such stressful experiences increase the risk through emotional factors which can trigger maladaptive coping responses.

The mechanisms involved are increased stress, negative mental and emotional patterns and poor mental health. Earlier studies have shown that insufficient sleep can cause problems with overweightness and obesity.

“These factors impact negatively on appetite regulation, metabolism, eating behaviour, sleep, inflammation and cognitive function – which in turn pave the way for obesity,” says Hemmingsson.
Of course there are many causes of obesity which can tie in with a negative spiral of socioeconomic factors. A study has also shown that obesity can have a hereditary origin.

“These findings indicate causality, where the abuse is the cause of the obesity later in life. However, not everyone who is subjected to abuse will develop obesity, and not all obese individuals have been abused, so there are obviously other causes too. At the same time, it’s important to remember that child abuse is more common than we think, and it needs to be brought to light,” he says.

Predjudices

Hemmingsson thinks that research can help break down many of the prejudices about people who are severely overweight.

“Our studies indicate that obesity is caused by so many other factors than overeating or a sedentary lifestyle,” he says.

He thinks society currently has an unbalanced approach to the causes and the ways for treating obesity, almost exclusively focusing on eating and exercise.

For instance another recent study shows that breastfed infants are less prone toward obesity as children.

“These new studies indicate that we need to take a much more holistic approach in the treatment and prevention of obesity, where we give more consideration to the individual's childhood as well as psychological and emotional aspects. It can for example be about self-esteem and self-image, thought patterns, emotional stress factors and mental ill-health.”

Thus, Hemmingsson thinks there may be a need for psychotherapy or cognitive therapy to obtain lasting effects on obesity.

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Troublesome experiences in childhood can leave scars that coalesce as problems years later. A Swedish study shows that one consequence can be an increased risk of obesity in adulthood. (Illustrative photo: Colourbox) [8]

Researcher Erik Hemmingsson. (Private photo) [9]

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