

Trauma linked to risk of arthritis

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The expression "scared stiff" now has a more literal meaning.

New research suggests that people who suffer traumatic experiences during childhood or adolescence are significantly more likely to develop arthritis later in life. The study, published today in the Canadian Journal of Public Health, found that people who experience adverse childhood events, such as parents' divorce or physical abuse, are about 27-per-cent more likely to develop arthritis.

Jacek Kopec of the Vancouver-based Arthritis Research Centre of Canada said the findings may seem unusual at first glance but they are quite "plausible from an epidemiological point of view." He noted that while the research is the first to make a link between trauma and arthritis, a number of previous studies have found an association between traumatic events and chronic pain. "There is emerging evidence that psychosocial factors affect the musculoskeletal system through the hormonal pathways," Dr. Kopec said.

In other words, traumatic experiences, and the stress that accompanies them, may induce biological changes that make a person more susceptible to pain, or to specific medical conditions, later in life.

Jennifer Mason has no doubt there is a link. In a period of a few months, she experienced a dizzying array of traumatic events, including the death of her father, a serious motor-vehicle collision that almost claimed her life, and the breaking off of an engagement to be married. At the same time, she was finishing a university degree and trying to launch a career as a musician. "I remember feeling panic-stricken and a little overwhelmed. . . . But I had to keep going," said Ms. Mason, a Toronto resident.

As the stress mounted, she began experiencing sharp pain in her hands, then her other joints. She was ill for more than a year before being diagnosed, at age 25, with rheumatoid arthritis. Her doctor told her that he had seen the pattern many times before -- a series of traumas culminating in a diagnosis of arthritis. "He was careful to say the stress didn't cause the illness but that it may have been a trigger for something that was already dormant or in my genetic makeup," said Ms. Mason, now 50.

Dr. Kopec said the new research is important because it could point to one of many causes of arthritis. He said that if the link is demonstrated, trauma could be responsible for triggering about 6 per cent of arthritis cases. Because arthritis is one of the most common chronic conditions, affecting more than four million Canadians, that is a considerable number.

The study was conducted using data from the National Population Health Survey, an on-going Statistics Canada study that collects data on the health of Canadians. There were 9,159 participants who were free of arthritis at the outset of the study in 1994, and they were followed through to 1999. During that period, 1,006 new cases of arthritis were reported in the group. About 25 per cent of respondents experienced one traumatic event in childhood, and 21 per cent suffered two or more major traumas.

The Statscan questionnaire listed possible traumatic events as including physical abuse, the divorce of parents, parental abuse of alcohol or drugs, spending two weeks or more in a hospital, and being so scared "you thought about it for years."