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Can a History of Sexual Violence Lead to Heart Problems Later in Life?

New study suggests exposure to sexual violence, particularly in childhood, is related to poorer cardiovascular health in midlife

CLEVELAND, Ohio (September 22, 2021)—It is generally accepted in the medical industry that adverse psychosocial factors are linked to cardiovascular disease (CVD). A new study used quantitative meta-analysis, a type of statistical analysis that combines results across different studies on the same topic, to specifically investigate the association between sexual violence and CVD risk. Study results will be presented during The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, September 22-25, 2021.

The new study out of the University of Pittsburgh was prompted by two stark realities: first, CVD is a leading cause of death among adults; and second, more than 35% of women worldwide report lifetime exposure to sexual violence. Researchers in this new study reviewed data from 45 previous studies involving more than 830,000 adults, of which 77.1% were women. Studies were included if they had a measure of sexual violence (i.e., sexual abuse/assault, military sexual trauma, sexual harassment or sexual intimate partner violence) and at least one cardiovascular outcome.

Results indicated that sexual violence was related to adult CVD risk, although results varied by cardiovascular outcome type and measurement, as well as the timing of violence, with the greatest impact being seen in victims of childhood sexual abuse.

“These findings emphasize the need for providers to understand the sexual violence histories of their patients and the potential value of addressing sexual violence in CVD risk reduction,” says Dr. Karen Jakubowski from the University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine and lead author of the study.

“As cardiovascular disease becomes more prevalent for women, there is tremendous benefit in understanding all the factors that can contribute to a woman’s risk. That’s why studies like this one are so valuable,” says Dr. Stephanie Faubion, NAMS medical director.

Drs. Jakubowski and Faubion are available for interviews before and after the presentation at the Annual Meeting.

For more information about midlife women's health issues, menopause and healthy aging, visit menopause.org.

Founded in 1989, The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) is North America's leading nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting the health and quality of life of all women during midlife and beyond through an understanding of menopause and healthy aging. Its multidisciplinary membership of 2,000 leaders in the field—including clinical and basic science experts from medicine, nursing, sociology, psychology, nutrition, anthropology, epidemiology, pharmacy, and education—makes NAMS uniquely qualified to serve as the definitive resource for health professionals and the public for accurate, unbiased information about menopause and healthy aging. To learn more about NAMS, visit www.menopause.org.