

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 12:01 AM
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 11, 2017**

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Traumatic Events Take Toll on the Heart

New study links traumatic experiences with increased risk of heart disease, especially after the menopause transition

CLEVELAND, Ohio (October 11, 2017)—Today it seems about everything has been shown to lead to heart disease. Of course smoking is bad for you, as is high blood pressure. There's even mounting evidence that psychosocial factors can cause heart problems. A new study demonstrates how traumatic experiences can affect vascular health and, ultimately, heart disease. The study results will be presented during The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, October 11-14.

Heart disease is a leading cause of death in women. According to the American Heart Association, every minute in the US someone's mother, wife, daughter, or sister dies from a form a heart disease. To date, little research has been done to study the impact of traumatic experiences on vascular health as a precursor to heart disease. Even less work has focused on this relationship during the menopause transition when the risk of heart disease is naturally increasing, along with deteriorating endothelial function. (The endothelium is the inner lining of the heart and blood vessels.)

In this study of 272 peri- and postmenopausal nonsmoking women, researchers tested whether a greater number of lifetime traumatic experiences was related to poorer endothelial function, independent of demographic characteristics, other heart disease risk factors, estradiol, and childhood abuse history. The result was that women reporting a higher number of traumatic experiences (three or more) had poorer endothelial function which can make them more susceptible to a cardiac incident. For purposes of this study, traumatic experiences were defined as events such as sexual harassment, death of a child, being in a car accident, experiencing a natural disaster, or being beaten or mugged.

“These findings underscore the importance of psychosocial factors, such as trauma exposure, in the development of heart disease risk in midlife women,” says Dr. Rebecca Thurston, lead author of the study from the University of Pittsburgh, School of Medicine.

“Given the large percentage of postmenopausal women affected by heart disease, this is an important study that should remind healthcare providers of the need to thoroughly discuss a woman's history beyond simply asking about her physical health,” says Dr. JoAnn Pinkerton, NAMS executive director.”

Drs. Thurston and Pinkerton are available for interviews before the presentation at the Annual Meeting.

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.