Even mild brain injuries linked to shorter lifespan

By Lisa Rapaport
Reuters

(Reuters Health) - Just one brain injury in childhood or early adulthood - even a mild one - may be associated with a shorter lifespan and a variety of psychological and social problems, a study suggests.

Plenty of previous research has linked severe traumatic brain injuries early in life to an increased risk of impaired adult functioning. But the current study found this connection held up even for kids whose injuries didn't appear as serious.

Researchers studied 100,000 people born in Sweden from 1973 to 1985 who sustained at least one traumatic brain injury by age 25, comparing health outcomes in this group to outcomes in their uninjured siblings. At least half of the injured group was followed until age 34, and some people were tracked up to age 41.

People with a brain injury were 40 percent more likely to die during the study period than their uninjured siblings, according to a report in the journal PLOS Medicine.

Compared with their uninjured siblings, they also had 31 percent higher odds of receiving outpatient psychiatric treatment and 57 percent greater chances of getting inpatient mental health care. They were also 19 percent more likely to receive welfare and 28 percent more likely to get only a limited education.

"If survivors are aware of these risks, they might be able to better manage them and involve friends, family, medical and social services," said senior study author Seena Fazel, a forensic psychiatry researcher at the University of Oxford in the UK.

"For mental health, early treatment of disorders is associated with better prognosis," Fazel added by email.

Globally, traumatic brain injuries are the leading cause of death and disability in people under age 45, Fazel and colleagues note.

To assess the lasting impact when these injuries happen early in life, the research team examined data from multiple national registries in Sweden with records on health, education, welfare and disability services.

Mild injuries were most common, accounting for 77 percent of the injured people in the study.

Roughly one in eight injured people sustained multiple injuries.

While even mild injuries were associated with problems in adulthood, the connection was stronger when injuries were more severe, the study found.

The researchers acknowledge that they may have underestimated the prevalence of brain injuries. It's also possible that the findings from Sweden, a relatively affluent nation, might not apply to lower-income or less developed countries.

It's also possible that children with learning difficulties or developmental delays may be more prone to head injuries, a factor that might explain some of the connection between early life brain injuries and lasting mental health issues in adulthood, said Barry Willer, a psychiatry researcher at the State University of New York at Buffalo who wasn't involved in the study.

"Head trauma should obviously be avoided if possible, but there are many other factors that influence how our children turn out," Willer said by email.

Still, parents need to understand the lasting impact of brain injuries and monitor their children's participation in sports and other activities to minimize the risk of repeat blows to the head, said Dr. Paul Echlin, a researcher at the Elliott Sports Medicine Clinic in Burlington, Ontario who wasn't involved in the study.

"Parents should be educated about the seriousness of this injury and the effects that it can have upon the development and future of their children," Echlin said by email. "Environments or sports that expose a child to traumatic brain injuries should be restricted, especially among children that have . . . a history of these injuries."

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