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Opinion

BAY AREA / HEALTH

Childhood trauma's impact costs California \$1.5 trillion a year. Bay Area doctors are trying to break the cycle

Research highlights that toxic stress can have intergenerational effects. Screening and treatment may mitigate the risks.

By Catherine Ho

As a veteran Bay Area OB-GYN, Dr. Carey Watson is often a sounding board for the stressors her patients face during pregnancy, a time that's perhaps more critical for their health and the health of their future child than any other.

One patient recently shared that her family's only car had just been totaled, leaving them struggling to get around. Another patient confided that the father of her baby had been incarcerated again.

Watson learns these intimate details because she asks all her pregnant patients whether they've experienced childhood trauma, and whether they have social support and other tools to build resilience against stress — whether it's rooted in trauma, household dysfunction or other hardships.

The questions are part of a screening for what's known as adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, a term coined by Kaiser and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention researchers about 25 years ago in a seminal study that found that adults who faced many such traumas in childhood — including physical or verbal abuse, or having a family member in jail — are more likely to develop health problems later in life, including diabetes, heart disease, de-



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Screenings for childhood trauma are gaining traction in many California medical practices as the consequences of toxic stress on adult health become more evident. Kaiser Permanente's Dr. Carey Watson, left, and researcher Kelly Young-Wolff have been leaders in the field.

pression and obesity.

In other words, childhood trauma can affect not just mental health later in life but also, in a broad sense, physical health.

Subsequent research has expanded on this concept, finding that these health problems and others are linked to so-called toxic stress — the body's physical response to pro-

longed periods of trauma, including elevated levels of inflammation that contributes to high blood pressure, a weakened immune system that makes it harder to fight infections, and changes to hormones and development that can lead to stunted growth or obesity.

Having a parent with ACEs puts children at greater risk for expe-



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Dr. Carey Watson, left, and Kelly Young-Wolff led small pilot studies in 2016 and 2019 that laid the groundwork for Kaiser Northern California in 2021 to become the first major health system to routinely screen all pregnant patients for adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, during prenatal visits.

riencing ACEs themselves. So by screening pregnant patients, Watson hopes to intervene early by helping expecting parents identify and address their own trauma so they don't pass the negative effects to their children.

It marks a growing recognition among medical professionals that childhood trauma can lead to systemic — but potentially preventable — physical illnesses in future generations as well.

“If we're better able to address ACEs for pregnant patients during pregnancy and give them coping skills, it holds an opportunity to reduce the intergenerational cycle of ACEs and potentially prevent the onset of ACEs in the next generation,” said Kelly Young-Wolff, a clinical psychologist and research scientist at Kaiser Permanente Northern California Division of Research, who works with Watson, the OBGYN, on ACEs research.

It's one of the newest ways California doctors are tackling ACEs, which CDC researchers estimate cost the

state economy \$1.5 trillion a year in medical expenses, lost productivity and reduced quality of life.

The screenings, once considered niche, are now gaining traction in many California medical practices — mostly in pediatrics and primary

care, and increasingly in obstetrics, such as Watson's practice.

The expansion is thanks in part to Watson and Young-Wolff, who led small pilot studies in 2016 and 2019 to screen several hundred pregnant patients at Kaiser locations in Antioch, Pleasanton and Richmond. That helped lay the groundwork for Kaiser Northern California in 2021 to become the first major health system to routinely screen all pregnant patients for ACEs during prenatal visits — about 40,000 people a year — and connect them with services to help them manage related stress.

Those services include therapy and other mental health services as well as housing support and resources on sleep, nutrition, social support and mindfulness. Kaiser that same year also started ACEs screenings for all children during well visits.

“We really started small and went very slowly,” Watson said.

California is moving more aggressively than any other state in addressing ACEs as a widespread public health problem, doctors and advocates say. In 2020, it became the first state to reimburse doctors for ACEs screenings through Medi-Cal, the joint federal-state public insurance program for low-income Californians.

Since then, 1.6 million Medi-Cal pa-



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tients have been screened, more than 70% of whom are children and young adults under age 20, according to ACEs Aware, a state-funded initiative that trains doctors and other providers on screenings.

“California is leading the nation in early detection and early intervention on ACEs and toxic stress so we can prevent the downstream long-term harm,” said Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, the former California surgeon general and early proponent of ACEs screenings.

Burke Harris, a pediatrician, began screening her patients in 2009 when she worked in San Francisco’s Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood and noticed many patients who faced adversity at home were struggling with asthma, diabetes, delayed growth and ADHD.

ACEs screenings are done using a scoring system. A score of 4 or more puts you at higher risk for toxic stress and related illnesses. A score of 6 or more is associated with premature mortality.

ACEs are more common than many realize. In California, nearly two-thirds of adults say they’ve experienced at least one ACE, and 1 in 6 say they’ve experienced four

or more. The estimates are similar nationally.

The long-term benefits of ACEs screenings — whether they’ll help children and unborn offspring avoid health problems like asthma and diabetes down the line — won’t be known for years, even decades.

“We do hope to evaluate that,” said Young-Wolff. “It will take some time to see whether the screening has impacted some of these adverse health outcomes.”

Young-Wolff stressed that health problems are not inevitable just because one has experienced childhood trauma.

“ACEs aren’t destiny,” she said. “Resilience is modifiable.”

Things like healthy sleep, good nutrition, regular exercise and social support have been shown to help build resilience, which helps offset the harms caused by toxic stress.

“The impact is the worst when adversity occurs in the absence of protective factors,” said Dr. Edward Machtinger, director of the Women’s HIV Program at UCSF, a primary care clinic for mostly Black and Latina women living with HIV.

Machtinger, who regularly screens his patients for ACEs, estimates that

30% of the women at the clinic have post-traumatic stress disorder that is directly attributable to ACEs. He is also leading a pilot program to train clinics in California’s Central Valley to screen farmworkers, who experience high rates of ACEs.

“The good things in life — a present attentive parent, supportive nurturing relationships, engagement in safe stable places to live, opportunities for social engagement — those are protective factors,” Machtinger said.

To that end, advocates are pushing to make sure parents and caregivers are aware of ACEs so they can be better buffers for their children against toxic stress. First 5 California, the advocacy group for children and families, launched a public education campaign last year with ads targeting parents and caregivers of children under age 5.

“This campaign is focused on what parents and caregivers can do in situations where a child may have experienced ACEs,” said Jackie Wong, executive director of First 5 California. “Be calm, steady, present and nurturing.”

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