



Study Summary

ECHO Researchers Measure Pandemic-Related Traumatic Stress in Families

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Who sponsored this study?

This research was supported by the Environmental influences on Child Health Outcomes (ECHO) Program, Office of The Director, National Institutes of Health with co-funding from the Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research.

Why was this study needed?

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent social distancing strategies may have ongoing negative effects on mental health. To measure this, ECHO researchers developed the Pandemic-related Traumatic Stress Scale (PTSS) based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) Acute Stress Disorder criteria. This study describes the development and validation of this new measurement tool and reports differences in pandemic-related traumatic stress in a large sample of children and adults.

What were the study results?

On average, caregivers had the highest levels of pandemic-related traumatic stress, followed by adolescents, pregnant/postpartum individuals, and children. Within these groups, the researchers found additional differences related to age and gender. Adolescents, females, and caregivers of children under 5 had higher PTSS scores on average than younger children, males, and caregivers of children 5 and older, respectively.

Footnote: Results reported here are for a single study. Other or future studies may provide new information or different results. You should not make changes to your health without first consulting your healthcare professional.

What was the study's impact?

The researchers found that PTSS is a reliable way to measure pandemic-related traumatic stress in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Higher levels of pandemic-related traumatic stress were associated with greater symptoms of distress and lower life satisfaction. Unlike previous measures that capture traumatic stress reactions to a single event, the PTSS was developed to evaluate potential traumatic stress reactions to ongoing large-scale threats without defined time limits. Researchers and doctors can use this scale to distinguish general stress, depression, and anxiety from traumatic stress, helping them to identify people with higher levels of traumatic stress who may need mental health support.

Who was involved?

This study included 17,830 children and adults from 47 ECHO Cohort study sites representing all 50 states, Washington, DC, and Puerto Rico. Researchers split the sample into four groups including 1,656 pregnant or postpartum individuals; 11,483 adult caregivers; 1,795 adolescents aged 13 to 21; and caregivers who reported on 2,896 children aged 3 to 12.

What happened during the study?

Between April 2020 and August 2021, caregivers reported on behaviors observed in children aged 3 to 12, and adolescents and adults completed self-reported surveys on pandemic-related traumatic stress, depressive symptoms, anxiety, general stress, and life satisfaction.

What happens next?

The PTSS can be used beyond the immediate COVID-19 pandemic context. The PTSS could be adapted to evaluate reactions to other severe stressors that last a long time.

Where can I learn more?

Access the full journal article, titled "Development and Psychometric Validation of the Pandemic-related Traumatic Stress Scale for Children and Adults," in [Psychological Assessment](#).

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