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Benefits of feeling the warmth

DOI: 10.1038/mp.2010.53

While low socioeconomic status has been associated with a heightened susceptibility for mental and physical illnesses, a high level of maternal warmth during childhood could lower this risk, reports a study in Molecular Psychiatry this week. Maternal warmth appears to reduce the expression of pro-inflammatory proteins which are associated with adverse circumstances and are implicated in the onset of major depression and cardiovascular disease.
Edith Chen and colleagues took 53 adult participants who came from low socioeconomic backgrounds early in their childhood, with no significant differences in current demographic or behavioral factors, and tested patterns of immune activation and inflammation in the circulatory system. They were questioned about their early relationship with their mothers and their parents were called to confirm their childhood socioeconomic status. The individuals who described their mothers as warm and caring – 26 of the participants – were shown to have reduced inflammatory profiles compared with the other 27 participants, who had experienced low maternal warmth.

These findings could be important for promoting supportive parental relationships as a means of helping to reduce the negative medical consequences of poverty. This could also lead to future research into the mechanisms by which early childhood experiences continue to affect inflammatory signaling into adulthood.

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