

# Sexual abuse survivors have increased of psychiatric disorders

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New research finds that a history of sexual abuse, regardless of the victim's gender or age when the abuse occurred, correlates strongly with a lifetime diagnosis of multiple psychiatric disorders.

In the July issue of *Mayo Clinic Proceedings*, researchers report that a history of [sexual abuse](#) is associated with suicide attempts, post-traumatic stress disorder, [anxiety disorders](#), depression, and eating and [sleep disorders](#). Additionally, associations between sexual abuse and depression, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress disorder were strengthened by a history of rape.

"Survivors of sexual abuse are commonly seen in general medical practice," says Ali Zirakzadeh, M.D., Mayo Clinic Division of [General Internal Medicine](#) and principal investigator of the study. "Sexual abuse survivors face a challenging spectrum of physical and mental health symptoms, which results in high health care utilization, oftentimes without improvement in quality of life."

The study reports prevalence rates of sexual abuse in some populations are as high as 21 percent in adults and 33 percent in children. Furthermore, sexual abuse survivors can represent up to 25 percent of patient panels in primary care practices.

Researchers also explored why some abuse survivors do not experience psychiatric symptoms and suggest that [genetic variability](#) may confer a level of protection. "The protective effect of certain genes against the

development of psychiatric disorders in abuse survivors is an intriguing prospect.

If confirmed, future testing may more effectively identify victims of abuse who are at increased risk to develop psychiatric disease and lead to the development of better interventions and treatment" says Dr. Zirakzadeh.

Dr. Zirakzadeh adds, "The good news for patients is that physicians are now more aware of the link between abuse and psychiatric illness so that abuse survivors may be more readily identified and referred to specialists for treatment. We hope that heightened awareness in clinical practice leads to improved outcomes for our patients."

**More information:** [www.mayoclinicproceedings.com/](http://www.mayoclinicproceedings.com/)

Provided by Mayo Clinic

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