

Drinking problems in women linked to childhood sexual, physical abuse

November 17 2010, By Sarah Jorgenson

Women who suffered sexual or physical abuse as children are more likely to abuse alcohol than are others, according to a new study of 3,680 women.

The women who had been sexually abused as children were more likely to have four or more drinks in a day, be [alcohol](#) dependent and report alcohol-related consequences, such as drinking in a way that leads to a serious threat to their [physical health](#).

“[The study] shows a strong association between having a history of [child abuse](#) and problems with alcohol abuse. The take-home message is across a range of alcohol consumption patterns, child abuse is consistently associated with alcohol abuse. All of my measures found that association,” said lead author E. Anne Lown Dr.P.H., a scientist with the Alcohol Research Group in Emeryville, Calif.

Lown and colleagues examined cross-sectional data from the 2005 U.S. National Alcohol Survey, which questioned women about physical and sexual child abuse using eight alcohol measures.

The study appears early online and in the February 2011 issue of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*.

Researchers accounted for factors like age, marital status, employment status, education, ethnicity and parental alcoholism.

Certain characteristics of child abuse increased the likelihood that [women](#) would report both alcohol-related consequences and alcohol dependence. These include reporting (1) sexual abuse compared to physical abuse, (2) having two or more abusers, (3) non-parental and non-family physical abusers and (4) injury related to the abuse.

“A strength of our study is the very large numbers. As a result, we could look at specific characteristics of child abuse in ways that other researchers could not do,” Lown said. “For instance, we were able to show the effects of multiple perpetrators and look at types of perpetrators associated with alcohol dependence.”

Cinnamon Stetler, Ph.D., an assistant professor of psychology at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., said, “One thing unique about the study that really makes it an important addition to the literature is the way they were able to divide participants into groups of just [physical abuse](#) and just sexual abuse. That’s not very often done. Though the two types of abuse do co-occur frequently, it is often difficult to get the effect of one abuse verses different types of abuse.”

Rates of alcohol misuse associated with child abuse might be higher. Stetler said that the national data measures did not incorporate whether children experienced emotional or psychological abuse, like neglect. Surveys measuring abuse often have lower response rates.

“People who did not respond to the survey may have been more troubled,” Lown said. “This may mean that our results are more conservative.”

“We, as a society, have to take responsibility for the healing of children and adults with a history of child abuse,” Lown said, “We need to screen for abuse in all settings – not just screen for but have interventions in place that will address the long term consequences of child abuse.

Without screening, the problem will not be recognized.”

More information: Lown EA, et al. Child physical and sexual abuse: a comprehensive look at alcohol consumption patterns, consequences and dependences from the National Alcohol Survey. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* 35(2), 2011.

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