

Researchers find abuse during childhood may contribute to obesity in adulthood

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Investigators from Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and Boston University's Slone Epidemiology Center report research findings that may shed light on influences on obesity during adulthood.

Appearing in the journal *Pediatrics*, the study found an association of severity of sexual and physical abuse during childhood and adolescence with obesity during adulthood.

The findings were based on the ongoing Black Women's [Health Study](#), which has followed a large cohort of African-American women since 1995. Information provided in 2005 by more than 33,000 participants on early [life experiences](#) of abuse was assessed in relation to two measures of obesity: [body mass index](#) of 30 kg/m² or more as a measure of overall obesity and [waist circumference](#) greater than 35 inches as a measure of central obesity.

The risk of obesity in 2005 by either measure was estimated to be approximately 30 percent greater among women in the highest category of physical and sexual abuse than in women who reported no abuse. The association was dampened but not fully explained by allowance for reproductive history, diet, physical activity and depressive symptoms, which might have been intermediates between abuse and weight gain.

According to the researchers, the findings add to growing evidence that experiences during childhood may have long-term [health consequences](#). "Abuse during childhood may adversely shape [health behaviors](#) and coping strategies, which could lead to greater weight gain in later life,"

explained Renee Boynton-Jarrett, MD, the lead investigator of the study and a pediatric primary care physician at Boston Medical Center. She also noted that metabolic and hormonal disruptions resulting from abuse could have that effect and that childhood abuse could be a marker for other adversities. "Ultimately, greater understanding of pathways between early life abuse and adult weight status may inform obesity prevention and treatment approaches." Boynton-Jarrett cautioned that further studies are needed to clarify just which factors are responsible for the association of abuse with obesity and noted there is a consensus that pediatric providers should screen for abuse.

Provided by Boston University Medical Center

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