

# Childhood abuse linked with food addiction in adult women

May 29 2013

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Women who experienced severe physical or sexual abuse during childhood are much more likely to have a food addiction as adults than women who did not experience such abuse, according to a new study published in the journal *Obesity*. The study's findings provide valuable new information regarding potential causes and treatments for food addiction and obesity.

National surveys indicate that more than a third of American [women](#) experienced some form of physical or [sexual abuse](#) before they reached 18 years of age. Also, research shows that such childhood abuse has consequences not only for women's [mental health](#), but also for their [physical health](#). In particular, many studies have documented a link between childhood abuse and later [obesity](#), possibly because stress may cause one to overeat high-sugar and high-fat "comfort" foods in an uncontrolled manner.

Because of these findings, Susan Mason, PhD, of Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Medical School in Boston, and her colleagues looked for a link between childhood abuse and addiction-like eating behaviors in women. The researchers studied 57,321 adult participants in the Nurses' [Health Study](#) II, which ascertained physical and sexual child abuse histories in 2001 and current food addiction in 2009. (Food addiction was defined as three or more addiction-like eating behaviors severe enough to cause significant distress or loss of function.)

The analysis revealed that addiction-like eating behaviors were relatively

common among women in the study, with eight percent meeting the criteria for food addiction. Women who had experienced physical or sexual abuse before the age of 18 years were almost twice as likely to have a food addiction in middle adulthood compared with women without a history of childhood abuse. The likelihood of food addiction was increased even further for women who had experienced both physical and sexual abuse in childhood. The food addiction prevalence varied from six percent among women without a history of physical or sexual abuse to 16 percent among women with a history of both severe physical and sexual abuse. Also, women with a food addiction were generally heavier than women without a [food addiction](#).

Dr. Mason and her co-authors caution that the study's findings are exploratory and will need to be replicated before any conclusions can be drawn about a causal link between childhood abuse victimization and addiction-like overeating. If enough evidence of this association accumulates, the next step will be to find ways to reduce the risk of addiction-like overeating among women who experienced childhood abuse. "Women with histories of trauma who show a propensity toward uncontrolled eating could potentially be referred for prevention programs, while obese women might be screened for early trauma and addiction-like eating so that any psychological impediments to weight loss could be addressed," said Dr. Mason. "Of course, preventing [childhood abuse](#) in the first place would be the best strategy of all, but in the absence of a perfect child abuse prevention strategy, it is important that we try to head off its negative long-term health consequences," she added.

**More information:** "Abuse victimization in childhood or adolescence and risk of food addiction in adult women." Susan M. Mason, Alan J. Flint, Alison E. Field, S. Bryn Austin, and Janet W. Rich-Edwards. *Obesity*, 2013. [DOI: 10.1002/oby.20500](https://doi.org/10.1002/oby.20500)

Provided by Wiley

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