

# Sex abuse triggers early puberty and its problems

November 28 2013, by Karene Booker

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(Medical Xpress)—Puberty can be a tough time for all youth, but for girls who have been sexually abused, it spells double trouble. Sexually abused girls reach puberty before other girls, a new study finds, and early puberty increases their risk of having emotional problems.

"Early maturing girls are already more vulnerable to mood problems than other kids, but this risk seems to be magnified for girls with histories of sexual abuse," said Jane Mendle, assistant professor of human development in Cornell's College of Human Ecology, whose study was published online (Aug. 28) in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence* ahead of print.

"Girls who reach [puberty](#) ahead of peers are substantially more likely to be targets of peer sexual harassment and receive a high number of unsolicited comments on their bodies," said first author Mendle.

For those with histories of sexual abuse (about one in five girls in the United States), these challenges and pressures may become a tipping point for emotional difficulties such as depression and anxiety, she said.

Mendle and colleagues studied 100 girls in foster care, all of whom had experienced maltreatment early in childhood. They looked at the type of maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect), emotional symptoms and level of physical maturity reported at two points, two years apart.

The team found no direct effects of abuse on the girls' emotional symptoms. Rather, they found that the number of [sexual abuse](#) instances, but not [physical abuse](#) or neglect instances, was linked to earlier pubertal timing. And it was these earlier developing girls that had more symptoms of depression, anxiety and social withdrawal. The study showed that girls' [emotional problems](#) were directly related to their experiences at puberty – not to what happened to them early in life, the authors concluded.

"In addition to individual interventions [to help early maturing girls], another target might be our collective social response to early puberty," said Mendle.

"Peers, caregivers, teachers and other adults have a tendency to react to children based on their observable – rather than chronological – age. Those reactions can be very powerful for how girls respond and interpret the challenges of growing up."

**More information:** "Linking Childhood Maltreatment With Girls' Internalizing Symptoms: Early Puberty as a Tipping Point," *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 2013.

Provided by Cornell University

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