

Childhood sexual abuse linked to a range of physical and mental health conditions

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A new review of previous studies into the long-term effects of childhood sexual abuse has suggested that earlier mental health support for victims would reduce the chances of victims developing psychiatric conditions

and substance misuse later in life.

Childhood [sexual abuse](#) is known to be associated with a wide range of health conditions, from chronic pain to [mental health problems](#). There have been many studies examining these links but these typically looked at one outcome in adulthood, and there has not been a synthesis examining the full breadth of international research evidence and its quality.

A new review of these previous studies led by Oxford University researchers, suggests that pre-emptive interventions for victims and survivors of [childhood](#) sexual [abuse](#) should be prioritized to reduce the chances of victims developing common [psychiatric conditions](#) and substance misuse.

The researchers from the University's Department of Psychiatry looked at quantitative reviews that used transparent and systematic searching strategies, also known as meta-analyses, of the research examining the chance of developing adult health conditions and psychosocial problems following childhood sexual abuse.

They identified 19 such meta-analyses that included more than 4 million participants from more than 500 primary studies. Of the 28 of outcomes studying later physical and psychiatric conditions and poor psychosocial outcomes (such as risky sexual behavior), clear links were reported for 26 of the 28 investigated outcomes, including a doubling of risk for [self-harm](#) or eating disorders, a three-fold increased likelihood of depression or [borderline personality disorder](#), and elevated risks of obesity and chronic pain.

Professor Seena Fazel of Oxford University's Department of Psychiatry, said: "Our research highlights the importance in understanding how childhood sexual abuse leads to conditions such as substance misuse or

psychiatric conditions.

"One of the key implications of these findings is that it provides an estimate of the population impact of reducing childhood sexual abuse to the occurrence of common mental disorders.

"Earlier intervention to provide support for victims and survivors is necessary to improve their quality of life and help to avoid additional complications and poor health in later life."

The review also modeled the reduction in the general population prevalence of common conditions if childhood sexual abuse was eliminated, and estimated that up to 10% of many common psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety, eating disorders and post-traumatic disorder in the general population could be prevented if childhood sexual abuse was stopped.

The full paper, "Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: an umbrella review," can be read in *The Lancet Psychiatry*.

More information: Helen P Hailes et al. Long-term outcomes of childhood sexual abuse: an umbrella review, *The Lancet Psychiatry* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/S2215-0366\(19\)30286-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(19)30286-X)

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