

KEY STUDY: WONDERLICH
CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND BULIMIA

Aim:

To see whether childhood sexual abuse is a significant factor for the development of bulimia in women

Procedures:

- A representative national sample of 1099 women in the United States was interviewed about a) their sexual experiences during childhood b) whether they had shown bulimic behaviour at any time during their lives
- Calculations were carried out to find out whether sexual abuse in childhood increased a woman's risk of developing bulimic behaviour (once age, ethnic group and parents' educational level had been controlled for)

Findings:

- Those women who had experienced childhood sexual abuse were significantly more likely to develop bulimia nervosa than those who did not report having been abused.

Conclusions:

- Childhood sexual abuse is associated with dissatisfaction about one's weight and body
- Consequently, childhood sexual abuse is a risk factor for bulimia nervosa

Criticisms:

- The data for this study came from interviews with adults who were asked to recollect childhood experiences. Such data can be unreliable, as respondents are prone to errors of memory. If they suffer from an eating disorder, they may also try harder to recollect some cause from their past to explain their adult problems
- However, later research by Wonderlich (2000) using data from abused and non-abused girls between the ages of 10 and 15 confirmed these findings from the adult women; abused girls were more dissatisfied with their weight and used more dieting and purging behaviour.