

Sexually victimized girls with PTSD not more likely to binge drink later

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Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common outcome of sexual assault among many teenage girls, but they do not necessarily cope by binge drinking, a new study finds. When they occur in these girls, PTSD symptoms, such as unwanted recollections of the assault, decrease over time.

The study found that those [girls](#) who had ever experienced sexual victimization reported more PTSD symptoms than those who did not, but there was no difference in the number of incidents of binge drinking.

While binge drinking is a risk factor for sexual victimization, the researchers wanted to know whether the reverse is true: that sexual victimization can lead to binge drinking. When they took into account binge drinking that may have already been in existence - before the victimization, or around the time it occurred - there

was no increase seen among these girls in the aftermath.

The study looked at data from 1,808 girls, ages 12 to 17, who took part in a national telephone survey and who were interviewed by phone up to three times between 2005 and 2009. Interviewers asked them about unwanted sexual experiences, such as forced sex, forced penetration by fingers or objects or forced touching of genitals. Researchers also asked the girls if they had five or more alcoholic drinks on a single occasion and if they had symptoms of PTSD. Over the course of the survey, 270 girls - or 15 percent - reported sexual victimization.

"Our study suggests that binge drinking may precede sexual victimization in a subset of adolescent sexual assault victims," said Kate Walsh, lead author and a clinical intern at Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston. The study appears online in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

The nature of the link between sexual victimization and binge drinking in adolescents is still unclear, said Jennifer Livingston, Ph.D., a research scientist at the University of Buffalo Research Institute on Addictions. People intuitively believe that trauma victims will turn to alcohol as a coping mechanism, but in reality, not everyone uses alcohol to cope, Livingston said. Thus far, there is no way to determine who will develop a drinking problem after an assault, she said.

However, there is strong evidence that binge drinking increases the risk of being the victim of [sexual assault](#), Livingston said. "[Binge drinking](#) contributes to sexual vulnerability among adolescent girls in two ways: through incapacitation, whereby girls are taken advantage of sexually, and by occurring in illicit settings, such as sneaking out to a party, where girls don't seek help because they are afraid of getting in trouble,"

she said.

Girls who reported sexual victimization had a higher tendency to drop out of the survey before the second or third phone interviews. The study used statistical methods to control for this and found that these dropouts did not skew the data, Walsh said.

More information: Walsh K, et al. Longitudinal trajectories of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and binge drinking among adolescent girls: the role of sexual victimization. *J Adolesc Health* online, 2011.

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