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Girls Abused by Dates at Higher STD Risk

By Charnicia E. Huggins

Adolescent girls who have been shoved, hit, forced into any sexual activity or otherwise physically or sexually abused by a date are more likely than their non-abused peers to have been tested for a sexually transmitted disease and to report being diagnosed with an STD.

“We are seeing a staggering proportion of teenage girls experiencing physical and sexual violence from dating partners,” study author Michele R. Decker, of the Harvard School of Public Health in Massachusetts told Reuters Health.

“Violence against women has been linked with numerous negative health outcomes and I think through this study we are seeing further evidence of the tremendous health consequences of this violence,” she added.

Decker and her co-authors analyzed data from 1,621 sexually active girls in grades 9 through 12, who had been involved in the 1999 and 2001 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

They found that almost one out of every three girls surveyed said they had ever been sexually and/or physically abused by a date. About a third of girls said they had ever been tested for herpes, genital warts or some other sexually transmitted disease, including HIV. Five percent of girls said they had been diagnosed with a STD.

Altogether, nearly 40 percent of girls who reported having been tested for a STD said they had experienced dating violence, as did more than 50 percent of those diagnosed with a STD or HIV, the researchers report in the medical journal *Pediatrics*.

Girls who reported experiencing both physical and sexual violence were 2.4 times more likely to say they had been tested for an STD and three times more likely to report having been tested for both an STD and HIV than were their non-victimized peers. These girls were also 2.6 times more likely than their nonabused peers to say they had been diagnosed with a STD, the report indicates.

Overall, “among dating violence victims we see that 1 in 12 girls report a sexually transmitted disease, compared with 1 in 30 for non-victimized girls,” Decker said.

When asked why dating violence might be associated with STD testing and diagnosis, Decker responded that it is likely due to a combination of factors.

“Often in a violent relationship the abuse will carry over to sexual experiences,” she explained, citing her work with adolescent girls. “That is to say that these girls are often in coercive or forced sexual situations with their dating partners and are unable to request condoms or ensure that condoms are used.”

And, Decker added, “men who are abusive to their dating partners often are very risky sexual partners as well, meaning that they are often having multiple sexual partners outside of the relationship and are not necessarily using STD protection,” like condoms.

To address dating violence, victims’ services in the community are “crucial,” according to Decker, and sexual health education should be broadened “to consider the role of sexual coercion and violence.”

But “the real work remains to be done with young men to prevent dating violence from ever occurring,” Decker told Reuters Health. “To truly prevent dating violence and its damaging health impacts, we must promote healthy and respectful relationships among teens and hold abusers accountable for their actions.”

SOURCE: Pediatrics, August 2005.

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