Shock research shows almost one in 25 middle-aged women suffer from an eating disorder

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ANOREXIA, bulimia and binge-eating affect more middle-aged women than expected with almost one in 25 suffering from an eating disorder.

Shock new research revealed that 3.6 per cent of UK women in their 40s and 50s said they have suffered from an eating disorder within the last 12 months.

Eating disorders are primarily associated with the teenage years or early adulthood, and researchers said the new figures are far higher than expected.

Sexual abuse and parents divorcing during childhood are two risk factors contributing to eating disorders in later life, the study found - while a good mother-daughter relationship was associated with a 20 per cent reduced chance of developing bulimia.

Around 15.3 per cent of women in the study reported having an eating disorder at some point in their life but less than 30 per cent of these women said they had sought help or received treatment.

Study lead author Dr Nadia Micali said: “Our study shows that eating disorders are not just confined to earlier decades of life and that both chronic and new-onset disorders are apparent in mid-life.

“Many of the women who took part in this study told us this was the first time they had ever spoken about their eating difficulties, so we need to understand why many women did not seek help.

“It may be that there are some barriers women perceive in healthcare access or a lack of awareness among healthcare professionals.”

Researchers also assessed factors that may be associated with the onset of an eating disorder including childhood happiness, parental divorce or separation, life events, relationship with parents and sexual abuse.

A woman's risk of suffering from anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa - two of the most common eating disorders in the UK - is increased by four to 10 per cent per unit score of 'unhappiness' if they reported being unhappy during childhood.

Dr Micali said: “Anorexia, bulimia, binge eating and purging disorder were all associated with childhood unhappiness, and parental separation or divorce during childhood seemed to increase the risk of bulimia, binge eating disorder and atypical anorexia.”

Sufferers of purging disorder try to control their weight or shape with self-induced vomiting, enemas, and misuse of laxatives and diuretics.

Dr Micali, of University College London and Icahn School of Medicine, New York, added: “We also found that death of a carer could increase the likelihood of purging disorder and that sexual abuse during childhood or a fear of social rejection was associated with all eating disorders.”

Researchers said the findings, published in the journal BMC Medicine, may have been limited due to some data being old and the sample of 5,320 women consisting only of pregnant women in a defined region of the UK.