Study uncovers hidden epidemic of eating disorders in middle-aged women

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Tens of thousands of middle aged women are suffering from eating disorders in a hidden crisis brought on by divorce, financial problems and bereavement in mid-life, new figures suggest.

It was traditionally thought that eating disorders were most common among the young, but new research from [University College London](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe)suggests around three per cent of women in their 40s and 50s have a recent eating problem.

In contrast, around one in 100 women between 15 and 30 have been diagnosed with an eating condition, such as anorexia, bulimia or binge eating, although many more may be suffering in silence.

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The new study, which questioned 5,300 women in Britain in their 40s and 50s, found that 15 per cent had suffered an eating disorder at some point in their life, and three per cent within the past year. It is the first time that prevalence has been investigated in a population of women in the fifth and sixth decade of life.

"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,” said lead author Dr Nadia Micali, from UCL and the Department of Psychiatry at [Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, New York](http://icahn.mssm.edu/).

“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."

The 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 or bulimia, two of the most common eating disorders in the UK, was increased by 4-10 per cent per unit score of 'unhappiness' if they reported being unhappy during childhood.

A good mother-daughter relationship was associated with a 20 per cent reduced chance of developing bulimia. Experts said that GPs should be made aware of the findings to help them diagnose problems in middle-aged women who might be reluctant to reveal an eating disorder.

Christopher Fairburn, Professor of Psychiatry at the [University of Oxford,](http://www.ox.ac.uk/) said: "These are really high figures and are important – there really aren’t any other studies of this quality and size looking at this age span, which is why we haven’t seen this before.

“We also see from this study that very few of these women have had treatment. We knew this for teenagers but this is the first data we’ve seen across this wide age group.

“GPs should be on the lookout and women should be told about this so that they can choose to seek help and know that there are treatments that can help them.”

Eating disorder charity [Beat](https://www.b-eat.co.uk/)said that the current thinking that people grow out of eating disorders needed to be challenged.

“Stereotypically, the world sees people with eating disorders as young,” said Tom Quinn, Director of External Affairs at Beat.

“When we reinforce stereotypes we also add to the stigma of these serious mental health illnesses and this stigma can prevent individuals coming forward to seek help – a dangerous path to take when the chance of full and fast recovery is vastly improved when treatment is found quickly.

“Last year, 15 per cent of calls to our helpline were about someone over the age of 40 and this research from Dr Micali only goes to further support the importance of providing an appropriate treatment pathway for individuals with eating disorders at all ages.”

Dr Agnes Ayton, Vice Chair of the Faculty of Eating Disorders, [Royal College of Psychiatrists,](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/) added: “The numbers are surprising, as most of the research has focused on adolescents and younger adults.

“However, they are not entirely unpredictable, as previous population-based studies have also shown that a large proportion of patients with eating disorders don’t seek help.”

The study used data from the Women from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children cohort and was published in the journal BMC Medicine.