Screening tool can help identify child sex trafficking victims
by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

A brief screening tool can help health care providers identify child sex trafficking victims.

Studies have found many survivors seek medical attention but may not disclose that they are being exploited due to shame or fear.

Researchers evaluated a brief tool that providers can use to identify these victims in pediatric emergency departments (EDs), child advocacy centers and teen clinics.

The study included 810 adolescents visiting one of 16 sites. EDs patients were included only if their chief complaint was acute sexual assault/abuse.

The teens completed a questionnaire regarding their sexual history, high-risk behaviors and contact with police. Health care providers then asked follow-up questions.

Overall, 11% of the patients were identified as victims of child sex trafficking by health care professionals based on survey responses and other information obtained during the visit. About 16% of the clinic patients, 13% of ED patients and 6% of child advocacy center patients in the study were classified as victims.

About 84% of trafficking victims screened positive, resulting in a sensitivity of 84% and specificity of 57.5%.

Sensitivity and specificity were 83% and 49%, respectively in EDs, 84% and 61%, respectively in child advocacy centers and 85% and 55%, respectively in teen clinics.

When researchers removed a question about a history of broken bones or cuts needing stitches, specificity increased.

The authors called the tool an "enormous improvement over the existing situation" and said although it may incorrectly classify some adolescents as victims, doing so isn't necessarily problematic.

"The 'intervention' prompted by a positive screen may prevent an at-risk patient from becoming a victim of trafficking," they wrote. "Alternatively, failure to identify a victim may lead to significant harm."

They encouraged health care providers to be vigilant for victims and discuss concerns with patients who exhibit risk factors.