Introduction Prevalence estimates suggest that between 12% and 50% of women and between 4% and 9% of men report having experienced sexual abuse before 18 years of age. Although no sexual abuse-specific syndrome has been described, aggressive behaviour, social isolation, somatization, anxiety, depression, nightmares, inappropriate sexualized behaviours and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are the most frequent sequelae reported.

Methods The following sources were searched: Medline and hand searches of relevant journals from 1998–2009.

Results The sequelae of child sexual abused indicates that children not only express short-term adaptation problems, but are also at risk of adolescence and adulthood revictimization, drug and alcohol abuse and a host of other symptoms. Vulnerability to victimization and varied outcomes are determined by interactions of three sets of mutually influential factors: personal variables, event factors, and environmental factors. Based on the literature, we predicted a high prevalence of psychiatric disturbance in these abused children (30% or greater). Children who have been both physically/sexually abused appear to be at highest risk of psychiatric disturbance. Results show that in the sexual abuse group, single-parent families were more frequent (55.7% versus 32.3%; P<0.01), mothers were less educated (10.8% versus 13.1%; P<0.0001) and socioeconomic level was lower (36.8% versus 47.9%; P=0.0001).

Conclusions Child sexual abuse is a common problem in our society and medical professionals who provide evaluations of children who may have been abused need.