

Survey on Psychosexual Characteristics of DES Daughters and Sons

Reviewed by Pat Cody

LINDA TITUS-ERNSTOFF et al, "Psychosexual characteristics of men and women exposed prenatally to diethylstilbestrol," *Journal of Epidemiology* March 2003.

While earlier large studies of DES exposure have revealed such health effects as cancer, reproductive problems, and immune system impairment, up to now we have not had research on whether or not there are psychosexual outcomes. The present studies being done at major medical centers with National Cancer Institute funding provided an opportunity to look at whether prenatal estrogen exposure influenced sexual behavior.

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Completed questionnaires were received from 3,946 DES daughters and 1,761 unexposed women (controls), and from 1,343 sons and 1,358 males controls.

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As for possible psychological effects, these questions were only on the surveys for women. They showed sixteen per cent of DES daughters and seventeen per cent of non-exposed controls reported having been diagnosed and treated for mental illness. For both the DES daughters and the un-exposed women, the statistics are similar: depression accounts

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for 78% of mental illness, anxiety 15%, 6% depression and anxiety together, and 6% psychosis.

Finally, because of the possibility of prenatal hormone influence on brain behavior, this study shows that DES sons have a greater frequency of left handedness than do the controls. This influence is not found in DES daughters. The authors conclude:

"In summary, our data suggest that prenatal exposure to DES, a potent synthetic estrogen, does not materially influence sexual behavior in adult offspring. In particular, we saw no increase in the likelihood of homosexual contact, a possibility that has been widely hypothesized. We noted a relation between DES exposure and left-handedness in men, a finding

that may be consistent with an influence of DES on cortical asymmetry and laterality. Although we found no association between DES exposure and mental illness in women, the question is not easily addressed in these data because survey respondents may under-represent those affected by mental illness and may misclassify outcomes in these self-reported data." ■