

Could premature birth affect adult relationships, self-esteem?

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Young people who were born preemies start having sex later than their peers, study finds.

(HealthDay)—Young adults who were born prematurely are less likely than their peers to have intimate relationships, and may see themselves as somewhat less attractive, a new study suggests.

Finnish researchers found that [young adults](#) who'd been born just a few weeks early gave themselves slightly lower attractiveness ratings, on average. And they were less likely than their full-term peers to have had sex or lived with a romantic partner.

The findings add to evidence that [preterm birth](#) can affect not only physical health, but [social development](#), too, the researchers said.

Still, some precautions are in order, said Dr. Edward McCabe, chief medical officer for the March of Dimes.

The fact that some young people put off sex is not necessarily a bad thing, noted McCabe, who was not involved in the study. It all depends on the reasons, he said.

If it's related to low self-esteem, that would be concerning. But if it's related to personality, maybe not, said McCabe. Research suggests that, on average, kids born preterm tend to be more cautious than their peers.

The lead researcher on the study, published online Jan. 26 in *Pediatrics*, agreed that disposition could be a factor.

"Our findings may reflect the personality traits of those born preterm, as previous studies have found preterm-born individuals to be more cautious and less risk-taking," said Dr. Tuija Mannisto, of the National Institute for Health and Welfare in Helsinki.

That, Mannisto said, may mean fewer romantic relationships—but the consequences of that are unclear.

Another key point, McCabe said, is that the young adults in this study were born in the 1980s.

"That was a whole other era," he said. "Care in [newborn intensive care units] is much different today, and [preterm infants](#)' outcomes are much different."

It will be years before researchers know anything about the long-term social development of today's premies, McCabe noted.

"But my guess is, they'll have different outcomes than these young adults," he said.

And while researchers found a link between preterm birth and later

relationships as an adult, it didn't prove cause-and-effect.

The findings are based on 753 Finnish adults who were 23 years old on average. Almost half had been born full-term (at the 37th week of pregnancy or later), while one-third were "late" preterm (between the 34th and 36th week), and 20 percent were "early" preterm (before the 34th week).

Overall, the two preterm groups gave slightly lower ratings to their own sexual attractiveness. On a scale of 1 to 10, the full-term group gave themselves an average rating of 6.9. Those scores were 6.2 and 6.5 in the early- and late-preterm groups, respectively.

The difference was significant in statistical terms, the researchers said.

"But does something with statistical significance necessarily have real-world significance? Not always," said Brandon Korman, a neuropsychologist at Miami Children's Hospital in Florida. He was not involved in the study.

Korman agreed with McCabe that it's not clear how much of an issue the other findings are, either.

For example, about 71 percent of young adults born full-term said they'd ever lived with a romantic partner—versus 55 to 57 percent of the two groups born preterm.

"Is not living with someone by the time you're 23 a bad thing?" Korman said. "I don't know."

As for sexual activity, 88 percent of young adults born full-term said they'd ever had sex. That compared with about 79 percent of the late-preterm group, and 83 percent of the early-preterm group.

There's no question, McCabe said, that very premature babies are at risk of learning disabilities, physical and mental impairments, and behavioral problems long-term. They also have more problems living on their own and forming relationships as they grow older.

"But the vast majority of [preterm babies](#) are late-preterm," McCabe said. So it's important, he added, to have studies that follow the subtler difficulties those kids may face.

That said, studies like this can only show overall group patterns, and the average for a group is not true of all individuals, Korman pointed out. "We know that outcomes vary greatly from one preemie to another," he said.

No young person born prematurely should look at this and assume, "I'm damaged," Korman said.

More information: The March of Dimes has more on [premature babies](#).

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