

A large, light brown silhouette of a person's head and torso is positioned on the left side of the page, extending from the top to the bottom. The rest of the page is white with a dark red border.

Conditions & Injuries Related to Domestic Violence

**National Prevention Toolkit on
Domestic Violence for
Medical Professionals**



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About this Guide:

Domestic violence injuries are not limited to broken bones, bruises, black eyes, and cuts. Studies have shown that chronic conditions, from diabetes to asthma can be caused by or exacerbated by domestic violence and the stress abusive relationships have on patients. The US Preventive Services Task Force recommends that all patients are screened for domestic violence.

How to Use this Guide:

This guide describes injuries and conditions that can be related to domestic violence in female patients. Although these conditions may have other causes, it is important for medical professionals to realize the wide range of injuries and chronic conditions that have been linked to domestic violence. Medical professionals who have an in-depth understanding of the broad impact of domestic violence on women's health can better address safety, awareness, and violence prevention.

Statistics

42 percent of women who have experienced physical or sexual violence by a partner have experienced injuries as a result.⁶

37 percent of women who disclose domestic violence talked to their health care provider.⁶

Studies have shown that two minute screenings are effective for early detection of abuse of pregnant women. Additionally, ten minute screenings have been shown to be highly effective in increasing the safety of pregnant abused women.⁶

Women exposed to domestic violence are:

- 16% more likely to have low-birth weight pregnancies³⁸
- 1.5 times more likely to acquire HIV³⁸
- One-and-a-half times more likely to contract syphilis, chlamydia, or gonorrhea³⁸
- Two times more likely to experience depression³⁸
- Almost two times more likely to have an alcohol use disorder³⁸
- More likely to be murdered. Homicide is a leading cause of traumatic death for pregnant and postpartum women in the United States, accounting for 31 percent of maternal injury deaths.⁶



Neurological Conditions and Injuries that Can Result from Domestic Violence

Chronic pain: Research has shown that domestic violence can cause chronic pain,¹⁻⁴ either through repeated physical injuries over a period of time, or caused indirectly by the long term stress that domestic violence causes victims.⁴

Speech problems: Stuttering and other speech problems can result from head trauma.⁵ Victims of domestic violence may experience stuttering⁴ after severe head trauma, or as a result of anxiety.

Migraines and/or headaches: Migraines and headaches are not uncommon among domestic violence victims.^{4,6} The cause of migraines is relatively unknown; however, migraines are closely associated with anxiety, depression, and distress,⁷ all of which are often present in domestic violence victims. Headaches can also be caused by traumatic brain injuries from hits and impact.⁸

Central Nervous System problems: The immune system, via the central nervous system, may be negatively influenced by stress and emotional distress. Stress increases cortisol, which is an immunosuppressive.⁹ There is a considerable link between stress and the onset of cancer, cardiovascular disease, and autoimmune diseases.¹⁰

Back Pain: Back pain can be caused by pushing, lifting, or pulling while twisting the spine, and can also be caused by herniated disks from injuries, tense muscles from stress, or other direct injury to the back or spine.³⁹

Stroke: Hemorrhagic stroke can be caused by uncontrolled high blood pressure (from stress or other medical issues), intercerebral

hemorrhage, or subarachnoid hemorrhage.⁴⁰

Traumatic Brain Injury: Traumatic Brain Injury is most commonly caused by falls, traffic accidents, hits (being struck by or against a moving or stationary object), and assaults.⁴¹

Hemorrhage: Regular aspirin use to treat physical pain is associated with hemorrhage problems.¹¹ High blood pressure caused by emotional and mental stress activates your sympathetic nervous system flight or fight response. This stress caused by domestic violence is associated with brain hemorrhage.¹²

Vision Impairment: Vision has been self-reported as worse following stress or a negative mood. Patients had greater than 20% reduction in their visual field because of the psychosocial factors of stress and mood.¹³ In addition, a majority of serious head injuries may temporarily or permanently affect vision.¹⁴

Cardiovascular and Respiratory Conditions and Injuries that can Result from Domestic Violence

Hypertension: Research emphasizes the correlation between chest pain and stress, depression, anxiety and panic disorders, all significantly impacted by domestic violence. Long-term, these psychological symptoms may severely deteriorate the heart's condition.¹⁵

Chest Pain: Exposure to trauma and PTSD resulting from trauma is correlated with increased metabolic syndromes and cardiovascular risk factors, often leading to chest pain. Victims of domestic violence are exposed to great amounts of trauma and may suffer from PTSD, increasing their risk for chest pain.¹⁶

Hyperventilation: Hyperventilation is associated with acute stress, PTSD, and Panic Disorder and can also present as a physical symptom of extreme stress or panic, often exhibited by a victim of violence in a medical setting. Domestic violence victims may exhibit hyperventilation in emergency room settings, or may seek medical assistance for the problem.¹⁷

Heart Disease: Evidence supports a strong correlation between social isolation/lack of social support, depression and heart disease. Victims of domestic violence experience depression, social isolation and a lack of social support, increasing their chances of suffering from heart disease.¹⁸

Asthma: Psychological dysfunction is correlated with asthma development and agitation. Victims of domestic violence will certainly experience psychological dysfunction from consistent exposure to trauma and will be at a higher risk for developing or agitating asthma.¹⁹

Heart Attack: The Mayo clinic lists stress as a potential cause for heart attacks. Victims of domestic violence experience a great amount of stress and may suffer from heart attacks as a result.²⁰

Intestinal and Digestive Conditions and Injuries that can Result from Domestic Violence

Gastrointestinal Issues: Gastrointestinal issues are caused by a variety of factors including changes in life patterns and activities and can result from stress. Victims of domestic violence experience disruptions in their daily life and suffer from extreme amounts of stress, all potentially causing gastrointestinal issues.²¹

Stomach Ulcers: Believed to be spread through food and water, the most common cause of stomach ulcer is *Helicobacter pylori* (*H. pylori*) bacteria. Previously, scientists have believed stress to be correlated with the development of gastric ulcers, and many patients still report stress as increasing the pain associated with gastric ulcers. Physical stress, particularly in the stomach region, may increase the chances of developing an ulcer. Because victims of domestic violence experience extreme physical and emotional stress, they may be susceptible to gastric ulcers with heightened associated pain.²²

Spastic Colon/Indigestion/Diarrhea: Spastic colon, indigestion and diarrhea are all symptoms of Irritable Bowel Syndrome, traditionally believed to be a miscommunication between the nerves and the muscles of the bowels. Irritable bowel syndrome can be triggered by a variety of things including stress, and while stress is not a direct cause, the combination of poor dietary habits and stress can result in IBS. Victims of domestic violence may suffer from depression, or physically may be unable to maintain their dietary health; when combined with stress levels, Irritable Bowel syndrome may occur.²³

IBS: Stress, anxiety, and IBS are related in some way. Stress and anxiety may make patients more aware of IBS symptoms and stress may affect the immune system making it easier to develop IBS.²⁴ Domestic violence victims with psychological stress were more likely to suffer from IBS.²⁵ IBS symptoms are worse when there is more stress or a poor diet present.²⁶

Abdominal Pain: Mental stress involves challenge, threat, or worry about events in the future. Mental stress affects the body's stress response system. This stress can have adverse effects on the body,

including the abdomen.²⁷ Stress can cause decreased nutrient absorption, decreased oxygenation, less blood flow, and decreased enzymatic output.²⁸

Reproductive and Genital Conditions and Injuries that Can Result from Domestic Violence

Cervical Cancer: Sexual or physical violence may result in an increased risk of cervical cancer. Stress may cause women to lose their abilities to fight off a common STD resulting in a greater risk of cervical cancer.²⁹ If their partners are unfaithful and have many sexual partners, patients are 5 to 11 times more likely to develop cervical cancer.³⁰

Dysmenorrhea: Sexual violence has been shown to increase gynecological problems, including dysmenorrhea.³¹ There is a significant association between stress and dysmenorrhea as those with stress were twice as likely to develop dysmenorrhea.³²

Poor Pregnancy Outcomes: Poor pregnancy outcomes can result from stress during pregnancy and poor diet. Low birth weight of babies can be the result of stress, having adverse effects on newborn children.³³ Abuse during pregnancy can cause perinatal death and preterm low birth weight deliveries.³⁴

Sexually Transmitted Infections (including HIV/AIDS): Women who are domestic violence victims are up to two times more likely to contract HIV/AIDS and other STIs.⁴² Women who are in abusive relationships often cannot insist on fidelity, condom use, or refuse sex to the partner for risk of being beaten or left homeless. These women also often lack financial resources to leave relationships with those who expose them to STIs.^{43-45,47}

Vaginal bleeding/tearing: Domestic violence that involves sexual assault can cause vaginal injuries, such as bleeding and tearing. Women who are in abusive relationships may not be able to tell their partners that the sex is too rough or that they are being hurt.⁴⁴⁻⁴⁷ Repeated sexual assaults can lead to significant injuries to the vagina.

Vaginal infection: Vaginal infections are the inflammation and infection of the vagina caused by bacteria and organisms. Vaginal infections cause itching, burning, discharge, and discomfort during sexual intercourse.⁴⁸ Unsafe sex and sexually transmitted viruses cause vaginal infections. If a women's abuser has multiple partners, there is a higher chance of receiving a vaginal infection.^{3,47}

Urinary Tract Infection: Sexual assaults can cause Urinary Tract Infections. Women are more susceptible to UTI's because they have a shorter urethra that is closer to the anus.⁴⁹ If a women's partner is forcing them to have sex, or having anal to vaginal intercourse, there is a higher likelihood of contracting a Urinary Tract Infection.^{3,44,45,47,49}

Painful intercourse: Women who are sexually abused by their partners can have negative associations with sex.⁵¹ Painful intercourse can be caused from psychological or physical stimuli. Sexual intercourse can be associated with fear, sadness, anger, and resisting or not wanting to have intercourse. There also can be physical causes to pain such as tearing or other injuries.^{47,50}

Anal bleeding/tearing: Sexual assault can lead to anal bleeding and tearing. Women may not be able to resist or tell their partners that they do not want to have anal intercourse. Rough or unwanted anal contact can lead to these injuries.^{3,45,46}

Physical and Visible Conditions and Injuries that can Result from Domestic Violence

Healing Issues: Many domestic violence patients suffer such bad injuries and they are left with scars. Scars, physical or mental, can be a daily reminder of the pain they endured and result in low self-esteem.³⁵ Domestic violence may result in a divorce or break up, causing feelings of sadness, anger, loss, and anxiety.³⁶ Domestic violence victims have to adjust and redefine their goals.³⁷

Contusions: Domestic violence victims are commonly hit and punched which causes large, painful contusions.^{47,52-54} Blunt objects, as well as fists and feet, are common weapons that cause bruising.

Lacerations: Women can have long visible cuts on their extremities and covered parts of their body. Weapons used by abusers to inflict lacerations include knives, scissors, and other sharp edged objects such as broken glass.⁵²⁻⁵⁴

Broken bones and fractures: Victims of domestic violence may have broken bones or fractures from their partners. They may be hit with large objects, be pushed to the ground or into objects, or suffer a fall caused by abusers.^{3,4,52,54}

Hand prints (marks from another): Domestic violence victims suffer injuries from being slapped and held captive. They may have hand prints on their faces from being slapped, or finger and hand bruising around extremities from being held harshly.^{54,55}

Strangulation marks (around neck): Another common visible injury associated with domestic violence is strangulation marks. Abusers may put their hands or thin objects around their victim's throat to stop them

from talking, scare them, or stop their breathing.^{3,56,57}

Hematomas: Hematomas are caused by hard blunt trauma that causes fluid buildup under the skin. They are a result of abusers hitting, kicking, or using blunt objects and weapons on their victims.⁶²

Tendon/Ligament injuries: Victims of domestic violence may have sprains or strains to their feet, ankles, knees, wrists, or elbows. Injuries to the tendons and ligaments are commonly caused from victims trying to escape from their partners or being intentionally twisted and hurt to show power and control.^{57,59}

Facial trauma: Women who are hit in the face by fists, feet, and objects can have severe facial trauma. Breaks and fractures to the nose and other maxillofacial areas are common.^{52,54,58}

Broken teeth: Dental trauma may be visible if a victim has been hit in the mouth by an object or the abuser's fist. They may have chipped teeth, missing teeth, or injuries to the gums and lips.^{54,58}

Mental Health Conditions that can Result from Domestic Violence

Depression: Victims of domestic violence may suffer from depression due to feelings of loss of control, lack of worth, and fear for one's life. Other contributing factors to depression are being isolated, controlled, and injured by a partner.^{2,17,44-46}

Suicidal ideations and behaviors: When abuse is severe, women may begin to think about suicide or act on these thoughts. Suicide is caused by depression and feelings of hopelessness.^{2-4,17,44} If a victim feels like there is no escape or other way out, he or she may become desperate.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): Post-traumatic stress disorder is caused by a traumatic situation that continues to cause pain and fear. A woman may develop PTSD from living in an abusive situation. The intensity, duration, and perception of the abuse is a significant factor in PTSD symptoms.^{2-4,44,45,60}

Alcohol abuse: Alcohol may be used as an escape to stop feeling the pain or not recognize abuse. Alcohol can also be used to forget memories of past trauma.^{2,3,61} Sometimes, abusive partners force victims to abuse alcohol and drugs.

Drug abuse: Drugs may be used as an escape from victimization. The high victims receive may make the abuse seem less traumatic or help them forget the trauma.^{2,3,61}

Anxiety: Domestic violence victims commonly suffer from anxiety. They may have panic attacks or constantly worry or fear for themselves. Anxiety can be caused by physical, sexual, and psychological abuse.^{2-4,44,46}

Chronic and acute stress: Chronic and acute stress can be caused by the loss of control and the fear victims have from domestic violence. Amounts of stress can be different based on the severity and perceived violence the victim recognizes.^{2,3,17,59}

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