

Study finds partner abuse leads to wide range of health problems

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Women abused by intimate partners suffer higher rates of a wide variety of doctor-diagnosed medical maladies compared to women who were never abused, according to a new study of more than 3,000 women.

Many of these [health](#) problems are not commonly understood as being associated with violence, such as [abdominal pain](#), [chest pain](#), headaches, acid reflux, [urinary tract infections](#), and menstrual disorders.

"Roughly half of the diagnoses we examined were more common in abused women than in other women," said Amy Bonomi, lead author of the study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

"Abuse is associated with much more than cuts and bruises."

Compared with never-abused women, victims had an almost six-fold increase in clinically identified substance abuse, a more than three-fold increase in receiving a depression diagnosis, a three-fold increase in sexually transmitted diseases and a two-fold increase in lacerations.

Bonomi led the study, co-authored with researchers from the Group Health Research Institute and the University of Washington in Seattle, and published in the Oct. 12, 2009 issue of [Archives of Internal Medicine](#).

Their research examined data from 3,568 randomly selected women

patients at Group Health Cooperative, a health system in the Pacific Northwest. All women in the study consented to giving researchers confidential access to their [medical records](#).

Women in the study were surveyed by telephone about whether they experienced any physical, sexual or psychological abuse from intimate partners, including husbands and boyfriends, within the past year. Researchers then checked their medical records from the past year to see the diagnoses they had received from doctors in primary, specialty and emergency care settings.

The researchers then compared the diagnoses of the 242 abused women with the remaining women who had never been abused.

While other research has found a link between intimate partner violence and health, this is among the first major studies that has not relied on self-reports by women about their health status.

"We were able to go to the medical records and find out what abuse victims had been formally diagnosed with in the past year," Bonomi said.

"These women are not just saying they are depressed or have cuts and bruises," she stressed. "They are going to the doctor and having their problems diagnosed."

In addition, the study improves on past work because it includes a random sample of women enrolled in the health plan, and not just women who were already seeking some kind of health services.

Bonomi noted that many of the doctors involved in treating these women probably didn't know of their abuse history.

"For most women, abuse likely never enters into the conversation with

their doctors," she said.

The results suggest that physicians should use a "targeted screening" approach with their female patients to determine if they are being abused.

Any women who come to the doctor with complaints of depression, substance abuse, sexually transmitted disease, or cuts and bruises should be interviewed about the possibility of abuse.

"Many women may not volunteer that they are in abusive relationships, so health care providers should be suspicious if their female patients have any of these diagnoses and symptoms that occur much more often among [abuse](#) victims," she said.

Bonomi said these results may be conservative, and that many abused women may suffer even higher rates of some health problems than the study suggests. That's because the participants in this study all had health insurance, and research shows that [women](#) who are not consistently insured have higher rates of intimate partner violence and may have worse health overall.

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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