

# Pharmacies could play a crucial role in supporting victims of domestic and sexual abuse

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Pharmacies could play a crucial role in identifying and referring victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse to specialist services but need

ongoing training, support and adequate funding to do so, according to researchers from the University of Bristol's Centre for Academic Primary Care and National Institute for Health Research Applied Research Collaboration West (NIHR ARC West).

The research, published in the *Journal of Public Health* today [23 November], explored the views of community pharmacists in London and southwest England to understand what support they might need to start helping clients affected by domestic and [sexual abuse](#).

Those interviewed said they wanted to be more involved in public health programmes and felt confident in providing [public health services](#) in addition to medicines. However, they felt they lacked the skills and confidence needed to identify and respond to domestic and sexual [abuse](#). They welcomed training, alongside ongoing support from leadership, remuneration for extra work, and raising public awareness of the role of pharmacies in the context of a multi-agency healthcare response.

Domestic abuse is a major public health problem experienced by one in four women and one in six men in the UK. It has devastating [health consequences](#) and costs millions to the NHS. The biggest impact for women is on mental, sexual and reproductive health, with consequences including sexual risk-taking, reduction in contraception use and increased sexually transmitted infections.

Pharmacists suggested integrating domestic and [sexual violence](#) and abuse identification and response into existing public health services, for example sexual health consultations.

The researchers' previous work found that women who experience [domestic violence](#) and abuse are more than twice as likely to seek emergency contraception as other women. In the UK, pharmacies supply up to 50% of all emergency contraception and so could be ideally placed

to identify and refer victims of domestic and sexual violence and abuse. Previous research has also shown that pharmacies are well placed to play a part in the multi-agency healthcare response because of their accessibility on the high street and their high level of use.

Dr. Natalia Lewis, Research Fellow at the Centre for Academic Primary Care and lead author of the study, said: "Pharmacies are uniquely placed to play a crucial role in the healthcare response to domestic and sexual violence and abuse. We have seen them step up to support the national domestic abuse response during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they took part in the Government's Ask ANI and Safe Spaces codeword schemes. Our research shows that with adequate funding and ongoing training and support they could provide an important additional service to victims as an integral part of their public [health](#) offer."

Professor Jeremy Horwood, from the Centre for Academic Primary Care and NIHR ARC West, said: "This study is the first step towards a domestic abuse training and support programme for pharmacists, based on the successful IRIS (Identification and Referral to Improve Safety) programme for GPs. This could equip pharmacists with the skills and confidence they need to safely and sensitively [support](#) victims to get the help they need. We hope to get funding to test the effectiveness of the programme as part of a future study."

**More information:** OUP accepted manuscript, *Journal Of Public Health* (2021). [DOI: 10.1093/pubmed/fdab375](https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdab375)

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