



Health effects caused by intimate partner violence against women



Titulo:

Los efectos sobre la salud de la violencia hacia las mujeres.

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HEALTH EFFECTS CAUSED BY INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

What is intimate partner violence against women?

- It is the physical and/or mental abuse inflicted by some men on their partners (married or in an intimate relationship) because they are women.
- It is used by these men to keep control and power over women.
- It is quite common and may affect any woman. It also exists in every country worldwide.

Women and men have the same rights. There is no reason that justifies an act of violence. Violence against women is a serious attack on their rights and their health.

How does this type of violence occur?

- It usually starts gradually, through attitudes and behaviours which are not seen as abusive at the beginning; they are seen as **"acts of love"**, as happens with "jealousy".
- Then they develop as clear psychological violence (insults, humiliations, hurtful remarks) and eventually, although not always, as physical violence.
- Frequently, the abusive man will force the woman to engage in sexual acts. Forced sex constitutes a rape.

Due to the way this violence begins, many women take time to realize that they are being abused, but their health has already been affected.

THE DAMAGES OF VIOLENCE ON WOMEN'S HEALTH

Violence always has **very serious effects on women's health** even if we are not capable of identifying them. Women are aware that their health is not good but they don't link their state of health to the acts of violence.

The most frequent damages are:

- Mood changes, sadness because they feel they are not worth anything, an urge to cry.
- Backache or pains in their joints, headaches, muscle pains.
- Anxiety or distress, irritability.
- Insomnia, permanent tiredness, loss of appetite.
- Loss of sexual desire.
- Digestive problems (abdominal pains, gastrointestinal disorders, irritable bowel syndrome).

Other possible damages:

- **Physical injuries due to direct aggressions** (traumatism, wounds, burns, bone fractures, bruises...).
- **Forced sex**, which causes pain and/or sexually transmitted infections.
- **Menstruation-related disorders** (irregular or painful periods, liquid retention, irritability, etc.)
- **Unwanted pregnancies** as a consequence of forced sex (rape). In these cases, postnatal depression is more frequent, as well as shorter breastfeeding periods, scarce weight increase during pregnancy, and a higher intake of alcohol and smoking than with desired pregnancies.

- **Miscarriages, voluntary abortions and caesareans** are more frequent than in other women.
- **Women tend to isolate themselves** from their friends, family, neighbourhood, associations and social groups. This isolation is a strategy used by the men abusing their partners to keep them unprotected.

As a consequence of health problems, women suffering from abuse **need the support of health professionals and are hospitalized more often** than non-abused women.

It is very important that women talk about their situation of abuse at the doctor's appointment. Health professionals will be able to diagnose and determine the treatment for their problem and offer them support resources if required.



THE DAMAGES OF VIOLENCE ON THE HEALTH OF THE VICTIMS' CHILDREN



- The health of the victims' children is always affected, even if the violence is inflicted on the mother. The children will **show similar symptoms to those of their mother**, including physical injuries (bruises, wounds, cuts, bone fractures, etc.) or **signs of emotional suffering** such as eczema, asthma, sleeping disorders, lack of control over urine and faeces, irritability, anger, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicide attempts, etc.

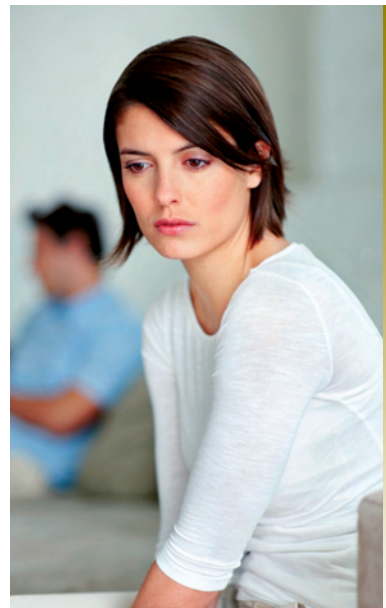
- **Slower growth**, low appetite.
- **Slower intellectual development**, in the language and motor skills compared to other children of their same age and social environment.
- **Lower performance at school** (lack of concentration, absences, etc.).
- They usually find it **hard to maintain relationships** with their friends and tend to be **alone and isolated**.
- They may **learn to solve conflicts through violence** and copy the behaviour of their parents.

If children or teenagers show these signs listed above, the causes should be studied. The sooner we detect a case of violence, the sooner it can be stopped and the victims' health improved.

PREVENTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. A COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

To prevent violence against women we can:

- Identify as violence insults, humiliation, threats, pushes, etc. which degrade women.
- Not be tolerant with abusers and not justify their behaviour with comments such as: "he was a good man but had problems with alcohol, his legal documents, his work" " women make false accusations", "this is a family matter (private)" "he was jealous... she gave him reasons to do it".
- Reject any kind of violence and learn to deal with conflicts to overcome them.
- Avoid macho comments and jokes because they humiliate women.
- Not justify controlling behaviours towards women, such as controlling their expenses, their way of dressing and putting make up on, restraining their autonomy to decide (study, work, mix with other people, leisure), etc.
- Abuse cannot be justified as cultural differences (the model of a good wife, good mother, good girl, etc.).



To avoid women's discrimination and contribute to equality, we can:

- Teach men and women mutual respect and equal rights.
- Offer equal opportunities to girls and boys and not expect different gender behaviours from them.
- Promote healthy affectionate relationships to encourage freedom and respect towards women.
- Avoid television programmes, videogames, films, etc. which promote violence and are offensive to women.
- Actively collaborate with entities and associations striving for equality.

The fight against violence is not a battle between women and men; it is a matter of working all together in improving family and social cohesion.



WHAT SHOULD WE DO IF WE KNOW THAT A WOMAN IS BEING ABUSED?

- **Make her feel she is not alone:** listen to her, offer her support and trust.
- **Help her get information** on the resources available.
- **Go with her to a place** where she will receive help (health centres, Municipal Offices of the Regional Observatory for Gender-based Violence, social services, immigrant associations, women associations, etc.)
- Let her know that she can **make an appointment at her Health Centre and talk about the problem at the appointment** with the professional seeing her.
- Respect her without being judgemental, stand by her side, **support her until she builds her self-confidence and she can make her own decisions.**
- **Give her positive messages** so she understands that she can overcome violence.

We must respect and not judge their decisions. By being by her side and helping her think about her situation, we can help build her self-confidence and make decisions.

IF YOU ARE BEING ABUSED

- To protect yourself, **don't inform the abuser** of the steps or decisions you are taking.
- **Many women** before you have suffered this situation and **have got through this. Be confident and seek help.**
- When you decide to report the violence, you will be protected by the law. **There is a law against gender violence which protects you**, as it includes every single woman, whether immigrant or not, even if you don't have any documents to prove that you are a legal immigrant.
- **When you go to an appointment, talk to the health professionals** as they can help you improve your health and start the process of leaving behind the violence.
- **Trust in your family and friends**, they can help you and **don't believe the abuser** when he says "you are a bad woman, no-one will believe you", "you will lose the support of the entire community, both morally and work-wise", "you will lose your friends", "you will embarrass your family".

You must be aware that many women before you have suffered your situation and have got through it. Even if it seems difficult, you must believe that it is possible to end violence and reorganize your life again.



RESOURCES TO HELP ABUSED WOMEN

Don't forget that you can go to specialized resources offering information and support:

In the Autonomous Community of Madrid

- You can get information and guidance by calling **012Mujer** (Helpline 012 for Women. This service is provided in Spanish, English, French and Romanian Languages) or by going to the Municipal Office of the Regional Observatory for Gender-based Violence (Punto Municipal del Observatorio Regional de la Violencia de Género) in your borough, within the Autonomous Community of Madrid.
- You can receive healthcare and information at the Health Centres within the Autonomous Community of Madrid.
- Phone number **112** is only to be used in emergencies.
- The City Council of Women or Local Social Services can provide information on Mutual Help Groups and Women's Associations which help women suffering from domestic violence.

Other resources:

- Official web site of the Autonomous Community of Madrid:
<http://www.madrid.org>
- Guide of resources of the General Directorate of Women:
<http://www.recursosmujeres.org/default.php>

On a national level

- You can receive information and guidance by calling **016**.
- For people with hearing and/or speaking disabilities, please call **900 116 016**.



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