

Health Awareness

Domestic Violence Health Risks: Doctors Can Help

(NAPSA)—While intimate partner violence (IPV), or domestic violence, is one of the most common health risks to women in the United States and can have a profoundly negative impact on health and well-being, there are ways to prevent it. Unfortunately, every minute, 24 people are victims of rape, physical violence, or stalking by a partner or spouse in the United States, according to a National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.

IPV is physical, psychological or sexual harm by a current or former partner or spouse. Both women and men can be at risk from either heterosexual or same-sex partners. IPV affects people in every community, regardless of race, religion, educational background or economic status.

Domestic violence stems from an abuser using power and control to emotionally or physically hurt a person close to him or her, typically in an intimate or family relationship. Someone experiencing domestic violence may have physical injuries, psychological trauma or may even die from the abuse.

Injury Beyond Wounds

IPV can result in a variety of negative health outcomes including injury and pain, nervousness and stomach disorders, severe headaches, and mental health problems. In addition, the stress of being threatened and injured by a loved one can lead to coping in ways that compromise health and wellness—things such as over- or undereating, alcohol and drug use, and isolation.

Those who witness violence—typically children—are also affected. Intimate partner violence often cycles and passes from parents to their children largely because what is seen at a young



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age is later believed to be “normal” in their own family and in relationships. Stopping the cycle of violence begins when steps can be taken to support healthy relationships that are not abusive.

Your Doctor Can Help

Domestic violence often goes undetected or unreported. Fortunately, new research shows that screening and support programs offered in primary care can help prevent violence against women. As a result, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force has recommended that primary care clinicians screen all women ages 14 to 46 for intimate partner violence. Discussions with doctors and nurses are a safe way for patients to discuss what is happening and get help and referrals to supportive programs and services.

Domestic Violence Screening and Support Services

Doctors often screen for health risks that were once considered too private to discuss, such as tobacco use, alcohol abuse, and HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Now, IPV has been added to that list. This means that if you are a woman between the ages of 14 and 46, you may be asked about your intimate relationship or given a questionnaire about IPV during a doctor's office

visit. Since, by some estimates, one in four women experience IPV, many women may be helped as a result of this screening.

The benefit of screening for intimate partner violence is to identify women who are being abused, link them with the help they may need, and reduce the chance of future violence and abuse. It may also help identify physical and mental harms that stem from IPV, even if the woman is not showing signs or symptoms of these conditions. If a woman screens positive for IPV, supports offered by her doctor can range from a toll-free hotline to peer support programs or domestic violence shelters, depending on her situation and the community resources available.

While family violence can be experienced by anyone—children, men, women, the elderly—there is currently not enough evidence about how primary care clinicians can effectively screen and intervene for individuals aside from women ages 14 to 46. But anyone concerned about this issue should talk with a doctor or nurse.

Protecting Your Health

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force is an independent group of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that makes recommendations on primary care services. Recently, the Task Force reviewed the research on screening women for intimate partner violence and issued a recommendation.

For more information on the Task Force and to read the full report on intimate partner violence, visit www.uspreventiveservices.taskforce.org.

If you are experiencing domestic violence, there is help at the National Domestic Violence Hotline—(800) 799-7233.