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Prevalence of Intimate Partner Violence and Health Implications for Women Using Emergency Departments and Primary Care Clinics

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Abstract:

Objectives: To determine prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) among women accessing health care; factors that influence rates of abuse; barriers to disclosure; associated health problems and perceptions of safety. Methods: A convenience sample of women seeking health care completed 1268 anonymous surveys, 75 in Spanish, while at one of 24 urban, suburban and rural emergency departments and primary care clinics. Results: Of women in this study, 50-57% had experienced physical and/or emotional abuse and 26% reported sexual abuse in their lifetime. In the past year, 28% reported emotional abuse, 12% physical abuse, 6% severe physical abuse and 4% sexual abuse. Logistic regression models found that younger, less educated, less affluent women presenting to urban emergency departments reported the highest rates of physical abuse. Although 83% welcomed abuse screening, only 25% ever had been asked and 86% would disclose abuse if asked directly, respectfully and confidentially. Abused women reported significantly lower health status ratings than non-abused women ($p < .001$). Emotional abuse was as strongly associated with health problems as physical abuse. The majority (70-93%) of women with headaches, stomach problems, chronic pain, vaginal bleeding, substance abuse, depression and suicidal thoughts had experienced lifetime physical/emotional abuse. Conclusions: Women experience many forms of abuse and present to a wide range of health settings. The striking prevalence of IPV and associated emotional/ physical health problems challenges providers to routinely assess for abuse in ways that minimize barriers to disclosure and enhances the development of an effective plan of care based on a patient's abuse experience.

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