



## Gynecologists Could Help Identify Sexual, Physical, and Emotional Abuse **CME**

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June 25, 2003 — A cross-sectional survey reported in the June 21 issue of *The Lancet* showed a significant prevalence of women who are victims of sexual abuse. More than 90% had not discussed the abuse with their gynecologist, and only 1% to 2% stated that their gynecologist was aware of their history of abuse.

"Why should gynecologists know whether their patient has a history of abuse?" lead author Barbo Wijma, from Linköping University in Sweden, asks in a news release. "Gynecologists are strategically placed to be able to identify victims of abuse and refer them to other community support services."

Using a confidential questionnaire, the investigators estimated the prevalence of abuse among women attending gynecological clinics in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland. Of 4,729 patients recruited, 3,641 (77%) completed the questionnaire.

The ranges of lifetime prevalence across the five countries were 38% to 66% for physical abuse, 19% to 37% for emotional abuse, and 17% to 33% for sexual abuse. Not all abused women reported current problems related to the abusive experience. Between 92% and 98% of women had not discussed their experiences of abuse with their gynecologist at their most recent clinic visit.

"On a theoretical basis it can be assumed that a patient with earlier abuse has experienced trauma in situations in which she felt subordinate, powerless, and maybe dependent," Dr. Wijma says. "The consultation situation for such a patient could have enough similarities with the traumatic situation to provoke flashbacks of the abuse and of the feelings she had when it occurred."

According to Dr. Wijma, feelings related to previous abuse could increase the risk that abused women might experience routine healthcare procedures as abusive.

"When the gynecologist and patient can discuss abuse they can also discuss the delicate issue of how to handle the consultation and the pelvic examination to avoid new trauma," Dr. Wijma says. "A concrete outcome of such an approach might, for example, be an agreement not to do a pelvic examination at that time if the indications for the procedure would be outweighed by the risks."

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### Learning Objectives for This Educational Activity

Upon completion of this activity, participants will be able to:

- Review the warning signs of abuse in women.
- Describe new data on the high prevalence of abuse against women and the level of reporting of history of abuse to gynecologists.

## Clinical Context

Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse exact a terrible toll on female victims as well as on society as a whole. A study of U.S. internal medicine practices by McCaule and colleagues in the November 15, 1995, issue of *Annals of Internal Medicine* shows that 5% of women in these practices were currently victims of sexual or physical abuse, and 20% of women reported some lifetime history of such abuse.

Abuse against women can happen to individuals at any socioeconomic level and in any cultural group. Women with a history of childhood abuse have been demonstrated to be at risk for revictimization as adults, according to a study by Coid and colleagues in the August 11, 2001, issue of *The Lancet*. Physicians should ask about a history of abuse in patients with frequent injuries and/or a history inconsistent with the type of presenting injury. Victims of domestic violence may also delay care for injuries. Most injuries sustained as a result of physical abuse are on the trunk and neck. However, the patient may also have bruises and abrasions on the upper extremities from trying to fend off her attacker. Another clue for abuse is bruises of different ages on the same patient. Women suffering from abuse may be more likely to seek care from emergency services as opposed to a continuity care provider.

The current study by Wijma and colleagues examined not only the prevalence of different types of abuse across Nordic societies, but also examined self-reported effects of prior abuse and disclosure to gynecologists.

## Study Highlights

- Patients presenting to gynecology clinics in Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, and Iceland were invited to participate.
- 3,641 volunteers received validated questionnaires documenting physical, sexual, and emotional abuse. This abuse was categorized as mild, moderate, or severe based on the chronicity, level of violence, and/or life-threatening nature of the abuse.
- Participants also evaluated the impact of a past history of abuse on their current health and whether their gynecologist was aware of their history of abuse.
  - A majority of participants completed all parts of the questionnaire.
- The prevalence of emotional abuse was 26.8% during the subjects' lifetime and 6.2% during the past year. 13.3% of participants reported a history of severe abuse, defined as living in fear for a long time because of abuse.
- The prevalence of physical abuse was 47.7% during the participants' lifetime and 3.9% in the past year. 12.6% of participants reported a history of severe abuse, defined as abuse that threatened the participant's life.
- The prevalence of sexual abuse was 24.1% during the subjects' lifetime and 1.2% in the past year. 14.6% of participants reported a history of severe sexual abuse, defined, essentially, as rape.
- Percentages of participants reporting current health effects from past abuse were 22.9%, 24.3%, and 16.8% for emotional, physical, and sexual abuse, respectively.
- 1% to 2% of subjects reported that their gynecologist knew of their history of abuse. 0.6% to 1.1% responded that they had been asked directly by their gynecologist about abuse of any kind.
- This study may be limited by its self-reported nature. Participants responding negatively to the questionnaire may not have recalled a remote history of abuse. There was some difference in prevalence among nationalities; the national culture's openness to discussing abuse, as opposed to the true rates of abuse themselves, may have accounted for some of these differences.

## Pearls for Practice

- Overall lifetime prevalence of abuse for this cohort of women was 24.1% to 47.7%.
- 16.8% to 24.3% of women reported current effects on their lives because of past abuse, but very few gynecologists knew or inquired as to a history of abuse.