

Indicators of domestic violence – gynaecology/obstetrics

Factsheet

“Homicide is a leading cause of death during pregnancy and the postpartum period.”



Please note that **none or all of these indicators might be present** or may be indicators of other issues, but they can serve as warning signs and a reason for increased attention and can point towards (a history of) DV.

Women who are subjected to domestic violence (DV) while pregnant tend to report encountering more severe and frequent acts of violence. They also experience more adverse health outcomes compared to women who face domestic violence when they are not pregnant.

Possible indicators of domestic violence

- Emotional distress, e.g., anxiety, indecisiveness, and hostility
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Sleeping and eating disorders (e.g., anorexia, bulimia, binge eating)
- Depression/pre-natal depression
- Social isolation/no access to transport or money
- Submissive behaviour/low self-esteem
- Fear of physical contact
- Substance abuse
- Missed appointments and non-compliance with treatment
- Frequent presentations to health settings or delay in seeking medical treatment/advice
- Miscarriage or other pregnancy complications
- Premature birth

Possible indicators for sexual violence

- Injuries to the genitals, the inside of the thighs, the breasts, the anus
- Irritations and redness in the genital area
- Common infections in the genital area
- Pain in the lower abdomen and/or pelvic area
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Bleeding in the vaginal or rectal area
- Pain when urinating or defecating
- Pain when sitting or walking
- Strong fears/avoidance of examinations in the genital area
- Severe cramps in the vaginal area during gynaecological examinations
- Sexual problems
- Self-harming behaviour or suicide attempts
- Unwanted pregnancies/abortions (obstetrics)
- Complications during pregnancy or miscarriages (obstetrics)



Please note that the lists are not exhaustive; it represents only a selection.



Find detailed information to **communication** in [Modul 3](#).

Indicators during pregnancy

“When you are in an abusive relationship, there are two conditions when violence escalates: when you leave and when you are pregnant!” (1)



Not every woman who is anxious and/or nervous in the context of pregnancy, medical examinations and/or traumatisation during childbirth has violent experiences. Still, it is always important to look into the individual reasons why a woman experiences a trauma during pregnancy and childbirth, and it is important to ask your patient about domestic violence.

Midwives in particular have the opportunity to observe non-physical signs of violence, as they have close and ongoing contact with patients during prenatal and postnatal care and often this provide them with a deeper understanding of family dynamics.

Possible indicators seen in obstetrics

- Missed appointments and non-compliance with treatment
- Frequent presentations to health settings or delay in seeking medical treatment/advice
- Overbearing or overly solicitous partner who is always present
- Injuries at different stages of healing or that don't fit with the explanation given
- Unwanted pregnancy or termination of pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Sexual dysfunction
- Gynaecological problems
- Menstrual cycle or fertility issues in women
- Low maternal weight-gain
- Known history of abuse in family of origin
- Emotional distress, e.g., anxiety, indecisiveness, and hostility
- Psychosomatic complaints
- Sleeping and eating disorders (e.g. anorexia, bulimia, binge eating)
- Depression/pre-natal depression
- Social isolation/no access to transport or money

Possible indicators related to the behaviour of the patient

- Restlessness, nervousness, fear and pain (specifically in connection with vaginal examination)
- Self-harm or suicide attempts
- Inadequate/delayed prenatal care



Find more information on **indicators** in [Module 2](#).

- Frequent hospital or clinic visits, especially when presenting with varied or unexplainable injuries or symptoms
- Presence of justified trauma with a confusing and contradictory history
- Continuous undefined health concerns and an anxious state that cannot be sedated with health reassurance
- Difficulty following health prescriptions, failure to respond to prescribed treatments
- Missing appointments
- Fear of physical contact
- Submissive behaviour/low self-esteem
- Refusal of home visits by social workers, family or paediatric counselling staff
- Substance abuse
- Victim appears evasive, socially withdrawn and is hesitant

Possible indicators related to the behaviour of the partner

- Controlling partner behaviour
- The accompanying partner is e.g., nervous, bad-tempered, aggressive, impetuous, arrogant, pushy
- Overbearing or overly solicitous partner who is always present
- Substance abuse of partner

Possible indicators of domestic violence after birth

- Postpartum depression of mother
- Maternal death
- Difficulties bonding with the new-born
- Babies with low birthweight/stillbirth/injury/death

Helpful sources

They can be found [here](#).

⁽¹⁾ Lawn RB, Koenen KC. Homicide is a leading cause of death for pregnant women in US. *BMJ*. 2022 Oct 19;379:o2499.

Image by Freepik