

## Domestic Violence

### What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is abuse that happens in a personal relationship. It can happen between past or current partners, spouses, or boyfriends and girlfriends.

Domestic violence affects men and women of any ethnic group, race, or religion; gay or straight; rich or poor; teen, adult, or elderly. But most of its victims are women. In fact, 1 in 4 women will be a victim at some point.<sup>1</sup>

The abuser may use fear, bullying, and threats to gain power and control over the other person. He or she may act jealous, controlling, or possessive. These early signs of abuse may happen soon after the start of the relationship and might be hard to notice at first.

After the relationship becomes more serious, the abuse may get worse.

- The abuser may begin making threats, calling the other person names, and slamming doors or breaking dishes. This is a form of emotional abuse that is sometimes used to make the person feel bad or weak.
- Physical abuse that starts with a slap might lead to kicking, shoving, and choking over time.<sup>2</sup>
- As a way to control the person, the abuser may make violent threats against the person's children, other family members, or pets.
- Abusers may also control or withhold money to make the person feel weak and dependent. This is called financial abuse.
- Domestic violence also includes sexual abuse, such as forcing a person to have sex against her will.

Money troubles and problems with alcohol can make it more likely that abuse will happen.

Abuse is also common in teens who are dating. It often happens through controlling behaviors and jealousy.

### What should you do if you're being abused?

Get help.

- Get in touch with a local domestic violence group for information and support. They can help you find out about legal and social services in your area. To find the program nearest you that offers shelter and legal support, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) or see the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence's Web site at [www.ncadv.org/resources/state.htm](http://www.ncadv.org/resources/state.htm).
- Talk to the police.
- If you are a teen, talk to a trusted adult, such as your parents, family friend, or school counselor. Many teens don't have the life experience or maturity to know when they are being abused. Talking to an adult may help.

Here are some other things you can do.

- Make sure that you know phone numbers you can call and places you can go in an emergency.
- Teach your children not to get in the middle of a fight.
- If you think you may leave, make a plan to help keep you safe. This will help when you are getting ready to leave. Your plan might include:
  - Putting together and hiding a suitcase of clothing; copies of your car and house keys; money or credit cards; and important papers, such as Social Security cards and birth certificates for you and your children.
  - Opening a savings account or getting a credit card, if you can do so in secret.

### **What should you do if you know someone who is being abused?**

Here are some things you can do to help.

- Be a good listener and a caring friend.
- Remind the person that no one deserves to be treated this way.
- Let the person know that the abuse is against the law and that help is available.
- Help the person make a plan to stay safe.
- You can also suggest that the person call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-799-SAFE (1-800-799-7233) to find a local domestic violence support group.

Keep in mind that the person may not want to leave. He or she often knows the abuser best and knows what options are safest. But it is important for victims of abuse to know where they can get help.

### **Why do victims stay?**

People who are not abused might find it hard to understand why anyone would stay in a violent relationship. Some people think that if a person stays in an abusive relationship, she or he must be weak or needy. This is not true.

There is more to this issue than simply leaving or staying. A woman may fear that the abuser will hurt her and her children or take her children away. She may have limited financial options. She may blame herself. She may stay for religious reasons or because she does not want to break up the family. Also, she may still love her abuser and hope that things will get better. A man who is being abused may have a similar experience.

### **What are the harmful effects of domestic violence?**

Domestic violence hurts victims as well as their families. Don't ignore it.

People who suffer from abuse can be badly hurt. They are also likely to have long-lasting (chronic) health problems, such as depression, headaches, and post-traumatic stress disorder. This is because of the repeated injuries and stress from living with abuse.

Abuse can happen more often and get worse when women are pregnant. It is dangerous for both the mother and the baby. It can raise the baby's risk of low birth weight, premature birth, and death.<sup>3,4</sup> The pregnant woman is at

higher risk of other problems, such as infections and bleeding.

And abuse has a big effect on children. Children who live in a home where abuse happens see violence as a normal way of life. It also raises their chance of being in a violent relationship as adults, either as abusers or as victims.<sup>5</sup> Teens are at a greater risk for depression, drug and alcohol use, and bad behavior.

**WebMD Medical Reference from Healthwise**



Last Updated: March 20, 2008

*This information is not intended to replace the advice of a doctor. Healthwise disclaims any liability for the decisions you make based on this information.*

© 1995-2008 Healthwise, Incorporated. Healthwise, Healthwise for every health decision, and the Healthwise logo are trademarks of Healthwise, Incorporated.