



The American College of
Obstetricians and Gynecologists



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS
FAQ083
WOMEN'S HEALTH

Domestic Violence

- **What is domestic violence?**
- **What are the types of abuse?**
- **How can I tell if my partner is abusive?**
- **What is the first step in breaking a pattern of abuse?**
- **What is a safety plan?**
- **What resources are available to help abused women?**

What is domestic violence?

Domestic violence is a pattern of threatening or controlling behavior imposed on a woman by an intimate partner without regard for her rights, feelings, body, or health. A woman is abused if she has had intentional, often repeated, physical, sexual, or emotional harm done to her by a person with whom she is or has been in an intimate relationship.

What are the types of abuse?

Abuse can take many forms. Some common types of abuse include the following:

- Battering and physical assault—Throwing objects at the victim, pushing, hitting, slapping, kicking, choking, beating, or attacking with a weapon
- Sexual assault—Forced sexual activity, including vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse
- Psychologic abuse — Forcing the victim to perform degrading acts, threatening to harm a partner or her children, attacking or smashing valued objects and pets, or trying to dominate or control a woman's life

There are many ways an abuser may try to control a woman's life. Some may take away her money, food, sleep, clothing, or transportation. Some may keep a woman from being in touch with her family and friends. Others may control her reproductive choices by trying to prevent the use of birth control.

How can I tell if my partner is abusive?

Disagreements and arguments, even heated ones, are part of a normal relationship. Physical violence or other abusive behavior is not. Everyone has a right to get angry. But no one has the right to express anger violently, to hurt you. Does your partner ever

- frighten you with threats of violence or by throwing things when he is angry?
- say it is your fault if he hits you?
- promise it will not happen again, but it does?
- put you down in public or keep you from contacting family or friends?
- force you to have sex when you do not want to?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, you may be involved in an abusive relationship. If so, you are not alone and you have choices. Remember, no one deserves to be abused.

What is the first step in breaking a pattern of abuse?

The first step in breaking a violent pattern in a relationship is to tell someone. Let someone know you are abused so you can contact them in case you need to leave a dangerous situation. The person you tell may be a nurse or doctor, counselor or social worker, a close friend or family member, or a clergy member.

At first, you may find it hard to talk about the abuse. But many abused women feel a great sense of relief—and some sense of safety—once they have told someone outside the home.

Feelings of shame are common at this point. Keep in mind that no one deserves to be abused. Violent behavior is the fault of the one who is violent, not the victim.

What is a safety plan?

A safety plan can help you and your children get out of a violent situation quickly. You can take these steps ahead of time:

- Pack a suitcase—Keep a change of clothing for you and your children, bathroom items, and an extra set of keys to the house and car with a friend or neighbor.
- Keep special items in a safe place—Have important items handy so you can take them with you on short notice. These may include prescription medicines, identification, extra cash, checkbook, and credit cards. Also include medical and financial records, such as mortgage documents or rent receipts. Be sure to take a special toy or book for each child.
- Talk to your children—Let them know that it is not their role to try to stop the fighting. Tell them to call the police or get help from a family member, friend, or neighbor.
- Know exactly where you will go—Regardless of the time of day or night, know a friend's or a relative's home or a shelter for battered women where you can go. Try to avoid fighting in a kitchen or bathroom where your abuser may have access to weapons or where there is no escape.
- Call your health care provider or go to the emergency room if you are hurt—Give your health care provider complete information about how you were injured. Ask for a copy of the medical record so you can file charges if you wish.
- Call the police—Domestic violence is a crime. Give the police complete information about the incident. Be sure to get the officer's badge number and a copy of the report in case you want to file charges later.

What resources are available to help abused women?

No matter what choices you make, counseling can help you with matters that will arise as you begin to make changes in your life, such as finding a job or dealing with money concerns or children's problems.

Sometimes a woman who has been abused decides to break away from her partner for good. If this is the case and you are married to the abuser, get a lawyer who is experienced in dealing with abuse cases. If money is a concern, check out the resources in your area—many communities have legal aid services. Ask your health care provider, counselor, or the staff of a hotline to recommend one. For more information about resources in your area, call the 24-hour, toll-free National Domestic Violence Hotline: 800-799-SAFE (7233) and 800-787-3224 (TDD).

If you have further questions, contact your obstetrician–gynecologist.

FAQ083: Designed as an aid to patients, this document sets forth current information and opinions related to women's health. The information does not dictate an exclusive course of treatment or procedure to be followed and should not be construed as excluding other acceptable methods of practice. Variations, taking into account the needs of the individual patient, resources, and limitations unique to institution or type of practice, may be appropriate.

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