

**Northern Healthy Connections Society**  
**Domestic Violence and HIV/AIDS**  
**FACT SHEET**



There are a variety of ways that domestic violence may put victims of domestic violence at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS; ways in which abusers use their own or the victim's HIV+ status as a weapon of coercion: and additional obstacles to health and safety that exist for HIV+ people who are also victims of domestic violence.



**How Domestic Violence Put Victims at Risk of Contracting HIV**

Victims are often unable to negotiate the use of safer sex practices with coercive partners.

Abusers may rape or sexually assault their victims as part of their pattern of control, making it unlikely that the abuser will use a condom. In fact, some abusers may intentionally put their partners at risk for contracting HIV in an attempt to keep the victim from leaving.

Abusive partners who engage in sexual activity outside the relationship, potentially expose victims to STI's including HIV.

Abusive partners may force victims to engage in sexual activities with others.

Victims of domestic violence often suffer a wide range of health-related problems caused or exacerbated by the abuse. This negative effect on their health may compromise their immune system in ways that increase their risk of HIV for example depression, not feeling worthy etc..

***Violence Against Women constitutes an urgent public health problem worldwide, particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.*** A growing number of studies document a high prevalence of physical and sexual violence against women, particularly by intimate partners. For example:

- In population based surveys on partner violence, between 10 and 69% women report being abused physically by a male partner at least once in their lives.
- In many countries there is a high incidence of non consensual sex particularly among young women. For example, a study in Peru finds that the percentage of young women reporting forced sexual initiation is almost 4 X higher than young men.\*
- In a local Colchester youth group 75% of young women reported either having been or knowing someone who had been sexually assaulted.

\* World Health Organization (WHO). 2002 World Report on violence and health. Geneva, Switzerland :WHO

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## **Violence and Direct/Indirect Exposure**



The links between violence against women and HIV/AIDS are a major cause for concern as violence can directly or indirectly expose women to HIV transmission. For example:

- Rape can result in vaginal lacerations and trauma, which in turn, increases risk of acquiring an HIV infection by providing an entry point or access to the bloodstream.
- Violence and fear of violence makes it difficult for women to negotiate safe sex including condom use in their relationships.
- Women who are exposed to childhood sexual abuse are more likely to engage in HIV related risk behaviours (eg. more partners, use of drugs and alcohol—which affect safe decision making) as a result of not feeling worthy or because of stigma and discrimination.

## **Obstacles to Health and Safety for HIV+ Victims of Violence**

- The abuser often controls access to financial resources, medical care and support systems. As HIV may progress to AIDS the victim of violence becomes less able to care for him/herself, more dependant on the abuser, and increasingly trapped in the relationship.
- Leaving may raise an array of concerns about care giving, failing health and the stigma of having HIV/AIDS. Many victims may believe that their only hope for a relationship is to stay with their current partner no matter how abusive the relationship may be.
- For victims with an AIDS diagnosis, they may be on disability or another fixed income and therefore, financially dependent on their partners for money to survive and pay for costly drugs and treatment
- A victim with children may be particularly reluctant to leave out of concern for the care of their children should they become incapacitated by AIDS.
- Lesbian and gay victims may have even less of a support network of family and friends if they've been ostracized because of their sexual orientation
- Victims who are HIV+ may be discriminated against in their attempts to get help ie they may not be able to access emergency shelter, housing etc.
- Victims who are HIV+ may fear that HIV+ status is more likely to be disclosed if they reach out for safety-related assistance
- Victims who are HIV+ may fear that if they seek services related to their HIV+ status partner notification practices will put them at risk of further violence.