

# Intimate Partner Violence and Brain Injury Fact Sheet

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a public health crisis, with one in three women worldwide having experienced physical or sexual IPV (Devries et al., 2013). The World Health Organization defines IPV as “any behaviour within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological, or sexual harm to those in the relationship.” IPV encompasses multiple forms of abuse, including physical violence (such as hitting, pushing, strangulation, and assaults to the head, face, or neck); emotional or psychological abuse and coercive control (including insults, humiliation, isolation, threats, and controlling behaviours); sexual violence (including forced sexual acts and reproductive control); financial abuse (such as preventing someone from working or controlling access to money); and cultural or spiritual abuse, which involves the misuse of beliefs or traditions to exert control or cause harm (Dicola & Spaar, 2016). IPV can happen to anyone regardless of socioeconomic, religious, or cultural status.

Nearly half (44%) of women in Canada experience some form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime (Statistics Canada, 2021). In 2017, nearly one-third (30%) of all police-reported violent crime in Canada was attributed to IPV, resulting in approximately 96,000 victims (Burczycka, Conroy, & Savage, 2018). Despite these figures, IPV remains widely underreported and underrecognized. Women in Canada are more likely to be victims of IPV than men: 79% of victims are women, and 70% of women report having physical force used against them (Burczycka et al., 2018; Sinha, 2013). From 2009 to 2017, more than half (54%) of IPV incidents resulted in physical injury (Ibrahim, 2019). It is further reported that 67% of

Canadians know a woman who has experienced physical or sexual abuse (“Angus Reid Omnibus Survey,” 2012).

In Canada, a woman or girl is killed violently every two days, most often by a male intimate partner or family member (Canadian Femicide Observatory for Justice and Accountability). Each night, more than 6,000 women and children seek refuge from violence in shelters across the country (“Shelters for abused women in Canada,” 2014). Indigenous women in Canada experience particularly disproportionate rates of violence and are nearly three times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019).

Women who experience intimate partner violence are at high risk of also sustaining a brain injury. Brain injury refers to an alteration in brain function that may be present at birth or acquired later as a result of an external force or a lack of oxygen. Research indicates that up to 92% of women survivors of IPV experience signs and symptoms consistent with brain injury

(Kwako et al., 2011). The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 2.3% of women experience a severe episode of IPV each year. Applied to the Canadian population, this equates to more than 230,000 women annually, and if 92% of



92%

Percentage of IPV  
survivors who may also  
suffer a brain injury

these women sustain a brain injury, this represents approximately 212,000 women in Canada each year. By comparison, for every one National Hockey League player who sustains a brain injury, an estimated 5,500 women in Canada experience a similar injury through IPV.



Brain injuries are prevalent among survivors of IPV because the head, face, and neck are among the most frequently targeted areas during assaults (Sheridan & Nash, 2007). A concussion is a form of brain injury caused by a hard blow or jolt to the head, neck, or body that causes the brain to move rapidly back and forth within the skull. This movement can stretch and sometimes damage neurons, disrupting communication between cells in the brain. Brain injury can also occur as a result of oxygen deprivation. Hypoxic or anoxic brain injury occurs when the brain's critical supply of blood and oxygen is reduced or cut off, such as through strangulation or suffocation. Strangu-

lation is a particularly common and dangerous mechanism of brain injury in IPV, as it can cause both traumatic and oxygen-related brain injury. Between 30% and 74% of women who have experienced IPV report loss of consciousness due to strangulation or head trauma (Zieman et al., 2017). Survivors who have been strangled are 7.5 times more likely to be murdered in a subsequent assault, making strangulation a critical indicator of future lethality (Glass et al., 2008). Beyond its physical consequences, strangulation is fundamentally an act of power and control, in which the perpetrator quite literally holds the victim's life in their hands.

Survivors of IPV who sustain a brain injury are also at high risk of repeated and cumulative brain injuries. Unlike athletes or individuals injured in accidents, women experiencing IPV often do not have the opportunity for their brain to heal between injuries due to ongoing violence. Repeated injuries sustained over time can exacerbate symptom severity, prolong recovery, and contribute to chronic neurological, cognitive, and psychological impairments. Over time, multiple brain injuries may increase the risk of long-term and potentially neurodegenerative conditions, compounding the already profound impacts of IPV on women's health and wellbeing.

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## Resources in Canada

**Women's Shelters Canada** – A national organization supporting women and children fleeing violence by providing resources, advocacy, and a directory of shelters and transition houses across Canada. Their website also offers information on safety planning and supports for survivors of gender-based violence. Visit <https://endvaw.ca/> to learn more and find services in your area.

**Brain Injury Canada** – A national organization dedicated to supporting people living with brain injury through education, advocacy, and connection to provincial and local brain injury associations. Their website provides information on brain injury, recovery, and available supports across Canada. Visit <https://braininjurycanada.ca/en/> for resources and support.

**Parachute** – A national injury prevention organization focused on reducing serious injuries, including brain injury, through research, education, and advocacy. Parachute offers evidence-based resources on concussion, head injury, and safety across the lifespan. Visit <https://parachute.ca/en/> for more information.