Institute For Addressing Strangulation

Information leaflet for victims of strangulation

ifas.org.uk **contact@ifas.org.uk**

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What is strangulation?

Strangulation is where there is pressure on the neck. This pressure leads to the blood vessels and sometimes the airways (windpipe) in the neck being squashed. This will end up with less oxygen getting to the brain.

People can be strangled in different ways. It could be by a hand or hands on the neck, being put in a headlock or by something wrapped tight around the neck, like a scarf, belt or rope.

Strangulation is serious and **there is no safe way to be strangled.** There is a risk to life every time it is done.

Whether you have been strangled once or one hundred times, whether it was today or many years ago, it is never too late to speak to someone. **And you will never be wasting anyone's time.**

What physical symptoms might you notice?

This depends on how much pressure was used and for how long. You might notice the following:

At the time of being strangled:

- Pain in your neck
- Difficulty or pain with breathing and swallowing
- Eye problems -seeing stars, blurred or loss of vision (sight),
- Hearing problems – loss of hearing, or a ringing, popping or roaring noise.
- Unconsciousness.
- Loss of control of your bladder or bowel so that you wet or soil yourself.

After strangulation

- Pain in your neck
- Difficulty or pain with breathing and swallowing
- Confusion, feeling agitated.
- Voice changes, such as a husky or deep voice.
- Headache, feeling sick or being sick.

Survivors of strangulation have explained that physical symptoms and recovery can last a long time.

What physical signs might you notice?

Only 50% of people who are strangled will have any injury to the neck or head that can be seen.

If a person does have injuries, it tends to be bruising or scratches to their neck. Some victims might have pinprick bruises (petechiae) on their head, face, eyes and neck.

Other injuries might also be seen if the attack included things such as punches, slapping or hair pulling etc.

Lack of injury does not mean that the attack was less serious or less dangerous or that it will be easy to "get over" psychologically. People have been killed by strangulation without there being any visible injury. Some dangerous injuries can be internal, such as damage to blood vessels in the neck. This can lead to strokes in the days, weeks or even months after strangulation.

What psychological symptoms might you notice?

Being strangled is terrifying. **Many people think they are about to die** which will be very frightening and affect them emotionally. This fear can continue for a long time after the attack. The realisation that a person (and it might be someone who you love and you thought that they loved you) has nearly killed you is a lot to deal with. The attacker uses strangulation as a way to control the victim and show that they have the power to kill. Victims are terrified, they may be in fight or flight mode, and feel unable to fight back or defend themselves.

It is normal to feel very upset or angry or even feel numb, like you have no feelings. You may have problems sleeping and concentrating. You may feel that you are to blame for what has happened even if you know this doesn't make sense. These are normal reactions to being a victim of an attack. If your symptoms don't start to settle after several weeks, or they are very severe, then seek help, for example from your GP, as you may have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)i It is normal for these symptoms to come and go and sometimes take you by surprise.

Symptoms of PTSD include:

- **Reliving** Flashbacks, nightmares,
- **Avoidance of reminders or emotional numbness**
- **Hyperarousal** Anxiety, hard to relax, hypervigilance, irritability, sleep problems, difficulty concentrating
- **Other** Other mental health problems, self-harm or destructive behaviours such as alcohol or drug misuse, Physical symptoms, such as headaches, dizziness, chest pains.

"I felt like I didn't know my own name afterwards, all I could think during the attack was, I can't believe I'm going to die like this." Anon victim

When the brain is starved of oxygen it often causes the person to have problems with memory of the attack and they may feel confused. The confusion will usually settle but the memory of the attack might never be clear.

If your brain has been starved of oxygen or there have been lots of strangulation attacks over some time, then you might notice ongoing brain problems, like forgetfulness or difficulty concentrating. Survivors of strangulation have shared that experiencing difficulties with memory is something that had a profound impact on them. See your GP if you are worried about this.

You might notice symptoms that could be a combination of PTSD and brain injury. You might have poor sleep, memory problems, mood swings, difficulty organising yourself, hypervigilance and anxiety. These are hard to deal with and will affect your confidence. These symptoms are a result of being a victim and not because you are weak or to blame.

When to seek help?

Immediately

Strangulation is dangerous and can lead to death very quickly. If you have been a victim of strangulation you should get medical help as soon as possible even if you are not sure about reporting to the police. If your brain has been starved of oxygen it is normal for you to be confused.

Your memory will not be clear about what has happened. You may be embarrassed that you have wet or soiled yourself. This is a serious sign that your brain was starved of oxygen and not something to be embarrassed about. The attacker uses strangulation as a way to control the victim. They know how scary strangulation is, and they use that fear to control the victim. If you feel that you are in this situation, you should get help as soon as possible, as the next attack may end up being deadly.

In the first few days

Page 1 includes signs after strangulation.
If you notice worsening symptoms, such as difficulty swallowing, difficulty breathing, weakness or confusion, seek immediate medical help, even if you have already been seen by a doctor. Some of the effects of strangulation, such as swelling around the windpipe or strokes, are not obvious at first and worsen with time. If in doubt seek help.

In an emergency call 999.

If you feel that you are safe and it is not an emergency, call:

Police 101

NHS 111 or your GP

In the following weeks or months

Strangulation can have an impact on many different aspects of your life. rk. It may be that the strangulation happened some time ago but you are worried about ongoing symptoms. This could be on going psychological problems or physical symptoms such as ongoing voice changes, weakness of one side of your face, signs of a stroke or dizziness. If in doubt, seek help, there is much that can be done to make things better.

Make a record

Whether you have reported the strangulation to the police or seen a doctor about it or not, it will still be useful for you to keep a record of any symptoms or injuries that you notice. If it feels safe to do so you can start doing this at any point when it feels right for you, it does not have to be immediately.

This will help in a number of ways:

- It will help you decide if you need to get more medical help
- It may be useful evidence in a prosecution
- It will help you make sense of what has happened, physically and emotionally. Sometimes victims start to think that they have imagined some of what has happened. It is useful to be able to read over the record or diary that you made and **realise that what happened to you was real and was serious.**

Medical investigations

If you have recently been strangled, the doctors will want to check you for injuries. They will want to make sure that you will not develop breathing problems or have any injury to the blood vessels in your neck. They may talk to you about having a scan to your neck and head.

Forensic medical examination

You may be asked to have a forensic medical examination. Here the forensic clinician will ask you some questions about the attack. Forensic samples such as swabs of your neck and nails might be taken. Photographs of any injuries might be taken. If the strangulation happens as part of a rape or sexual assault then the police will refer you to a SARC (a sexual assault referral centre). If you have not spoken to the police you can still be seen at a SARC. To find your nearest SARC go to:

England: Find Rape and sexual assault referral centres services - NHS (www.nhs.uk)
Wales: WSAS - NHS Wales Performance and Improvement
Scotland: www.nhsinform.scot/turn-to-sarcs/if-youre-under-16
Northern Ireland: The Rowan - Sexual Assault Referral Centre (SARC) | nidirect

Safeguarding

Strangulation is dangerous. American research has shown that in domestic abuse situations, victims of strangulation were at high risk of being murdered in the future by their attacker.

Where the person who has strangled you is someone that you care for, for example a partner, it can be difficult to accept that they have done something so dangerous to you. Unfortunately those that strangle once are very likely to do it again. They may have done it to someone else before. If their behaviour was reported to the police it can be checked using Clare's Law (clares-law.com)

People who strangle are dangerous to others. That is why police, healthcare workers etc will ask you questions about your safety (and the safety of any children involved) and are likely to make a referral to social services. This is to protect you, not to punish you. IFAS has developed a set of guidelines to assist clinicians in decision making about safeguarding referrals, which provides them with advice around when to report/share information about non-fatal strangulation cases. If you want to know more, the guidelines can be found here: Confidentiality and Information Sharing When Dealing with Adult Strangulation Patients - Institute for Addressing Strangulation

You are not to blame.

Some people who have been strangled feel embarrassed or feel that they are to blame. This is never the case.

A victim who has been abused over a period of time may "normalise" the abuse. The abuser will blame the victim for what has happened.

The law on strangulation

Section 70(1) DA Act 2021 deals with non-fatal strangulation. https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2015/9/section/75A in England in Wales. In Northern Ireland the legislation in under the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.
If found guilty, a defendant could get a prison sentence for up to five years.

Legally, an individual cannot consent to being seriously harmed if the person who strangled them either intentionally wanted to cause harm or was reckless in their actions. Where injuries meet the threshold for Actual Bodily Harm or worse, this means that someone who has strangled someone else cannot use their consent as an excuse if it can be shown that their intentional or reckless behaviour contributed to the serious harm suffered by the victim/survivor.

Support is available, for example by an IDVA (independent domestic abuse advisor), during the criminal justice process.

Non-fatal strangulation can lead to a stroke. Stroke is a medical emergency.

The **FAST** test can help you recognise the most common signs.

Facial weakness: Can the person smile? Has their mouth or eye drooped?

Arm weakness: Can the person raise both arms?

Speech problems: Can the person speak clearly and understand what you say?

Time to call 999: if you see any of these signs.

General advice

Being a victim of strangulation is a very stressful experience.

It is normal to have physical and emotional symptoms afterwards. This is not just because you have been through a life threatening attack, but also if you have been to hospital, had contact with the police and other professionals such as social workers. This will be physically and mentally draining and stressful and you should seek support from others such as your GP.

- You will need to give yourself time to recover.
- This should include resting physically and emotionally and listen to what your body is telling you.
- Take a few days of work or school, more if necessary.
- Gentle exercise can be taken when you feel ready.
- Avoid contact sports for several weeks.
- Do not drive for the first 24 hours.

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“Snack and nap a lot and don’t feel guilty”

Advice from survivors from: *A qualitative study exploring the impact of strangulation on psychological wellbeing, memory and the lived experience of developing ways to cope.*

Focusing on very small things in your life, whether it’s that fact that you woke up and you had some toast and jam, or you woke up and felt like, you’re going to have a really nice shower and use all your fancy body creams or something. Really small things that you can do for yourself like self-care and stuff (Danielle)



Take it every day as it comes you know. And no matter what you’re doing, you’re winning (Amy)



It is worth it to keep going and just focus on what could potentially happen positively in your life, not what has happened negatively (Katie)



Building those shoots of connection again is where the healing and the magic happens (Rebecca)



Do not feel guilty for not cleaning your room. Do not feel guilty for ordering pizza at 10 at night and eating it in your bed. No one cares. This is your healing time and that looks differently for everybody (Abigail)



You’ve pulled in so much of your own being. To survive. So just hang on to that and have faith in that. (Natalie)



Full report can be found here:
https://ifas.org.uk/you-look-fine-a-qualitative-study-exploring-the-impact-of-strangulation/

Where else can I get help or information?

Sexual assault referral centres services (SARC's) www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/help-after-rape-and-sexual-assault

SafeLives safelives.org.uk

Freephone 24 hour National Domestic Abuse Helpline: 0808 2000 247 (run by Refuge)

Women's Aid live chat service
(now open from 8am to 6pm on weekdays / 10am to 6pm on weekends) https://chat.womensaid.org.uk/

Northern Ireland: 0808 802 1414
Scotland: 0800 027 1234
Wales: 0808 8010 800

Men's Advice Line: 0808 801 0327
Respect helpline: 0808 802 4040
For anyone worried that they may be harming someone else.

Thank you to the incredible survivors who have helped develop this leaflet via @IFAS

SafeLives Ending domestic abuse

Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine
of the Royal College of Physicians