

Screening Immigrant and Refugee Patients for Torture Histories

Medical Providers Key in Identifying Survivors:

- 5 – 10% of patients presenting in urban medical clinics who were born outside of the United States are survivors of torture¹.
- Many survivors note that they expected their doctors to ask about torture and physical trauma, and felt uncomfortable bringing it up after their doctors didn't ask.
- Screening for torture histories in medical settings is a key step in identifying survivors and linking them to valuable supportive services.

How to Screen:

The Eisenman Screening Question provides a research based, empirically supported method for screening for torture histories in general medical settings during the second meeting with patient.

“Were you ever harmed or threatened by the following: government, police, military or rebel soldiers?”

If a patient endorses this question, follow up with:

“Some people in your situation have experienced torture. Has that ever happened to you or your family?”

These questions do not ask for specific detail, and are framed in a non-blaming way. They do not ask survivors to elaborate on the reasons they were targeted, or any other details that could lead patients to feel that their experiences were being evaluated for validity or truth.

The eligibility process is not an inquiry. It is simply intended to assess if patients meet the torture definition threshold, and should be linked to additional supportive services available to survivors.

If it does not appear appropriate to ask a particular patient direct screening questions, you can take an alternative approach:

“There is a program that works with people who have experienced torture before coming to the United States. Would you like more information about that program?”

What to do if a patient discloses a torture history:

Normalize –

“We see many people who have gone through similar experiences.”

Connect to medical treatment –

“How has this experience impacted your health, or physical or emotional well-being?”

Offer a referral –

“It can be hard knowing where to go to get support for things that might be related to what you went through. Can I make a referral to a program that works with people who have had experiences like yours?”

Articles For Additional Information:

- ¹ Eisenman, D.P., Keller, A.S., & Kim, G. (2000 May). Survivors of torture in a general medical setting: How often have patients been tortured, and how often is it missed? *Western Journal of Medicine*, 172(5), 301-304.
- Crosby, S.S., Norredam, M., & Frodin, M.A. (2006 July). Prevalence of torture survivors among foreign-born patients presenting to an urban ambulatory care practice. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 21(7), 764-768.
- Metalios, E.E., Asgary, R.G., & Sacajiu, G. (2008 July). Teaching residents to work with torture survivors: Experiences from the Bronx Human Rights Clinic. *Journal of General Internal Medicine*, 23(7), 1038-1042.

