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CAEPV E-Update

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STUDY FINDS 1 IN 4 US WOMEN OVER AGE 65 HAVE BEEN VICTIMS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Columbus, Ohio – About one in four women older than 65 has been the victim of physical, sexual or psychological violence at the hands of a spouse or other intimate partner, according to a study done in two northwestern states. About 3.5% of the women surveyed had suffered violence in the past five years, and 2.2% in the past year. "Intimate partner violence is not a problem only for younger women," said Amy Bonomi, PhD, MPH, lead author of the study and associate professor of human development and family science at Ohio State University.

The study appears in the February 2007 issue of *The Gerontologist*. It involved telephone interviews with 370 women aged 65 years and older who belonged to a health care system in western Washington state and northern Idaho. Bonomi said this is one of only a handful of studies to focus solely on the depth and breadth of violence perpetrated by intimate partners against older women.

The results showed that 26.5% of the women surveyed reported violence by an intimate partner over their lifetimes. Of those who reported abuse, most were the victims of multiple types. "It was very rare that women experienced only one type of violence," Bonomi said. "Over half experienced two or more types of violence. That's troubling."

About 18% reported sexual or physical abuse and 22% were the victims of psychological abuse, including being threatened, called derogatory names or having their behavior controlled by their partner. The psychological abuse experienced by women in this study was not minor, Bonomi said. About 70% of women who experienced verbal threats by an intimate partner said these threats were severe. Additionally, women who reported controlling behavior had experienced this abuse for an average of 10 years.

In spite of the breadth and depth of violence in this group of women, only 3% said they had been asked by a health care provider about physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner since age 18. "Not enough doctors and other health care professionals are screening women for intimate partner abuse," Bonomi said. "The health care setting is a crucial focus for victims, because it provides a safe, confidential place for ongoing interactions between abused women and their health care providers."

While the prevalence of violence found in this study is startling enough, Bonomi said it is probably an underestimate of how much it actually occurred. One reason is that women were asked to recall abuse over a lifetime. There may have been a tendency for women to downplay violence experienced early in life.

In addition, women who participated in the study were consistently insured and highly educated. Violence rates tend to be higher in women without consistent insurance and women with less formal education.

Intimate partner violence takes not only a personal toll, but a financial one as well, according to Bonomi. In an earlier study by Bonomi and her colleagues, findings showed the health care costs for abused women were 19% higher than for non-abused women. "We found that health care costs for abused women were still higher even five years after the abuse stopped," Bonomi said. "This underscores the need to pay attention to the issue of intimate partner violence in health care settings."

The study was supported by the federal Agency for Health Research and Quality.

(Source: Ohio State University)