

WHAT ARE BEATINGS?

Beatings or the act of beating someone is a form of corporal punishment that is found under certain circumstances to constitute torture under international law (1,2). Beatings refer to the violent act of hitting or kicking which can be systematic (methodical and structured) or unsystematic (random) (3). Separate factsheets exist on systematic beating methods such as telefono and falanga. Beatings can be carried out with bare hands/feet or with objects including but not limited to rifles, batons, and whips (4). Because of its frequent nature, beating is usually labelled as a “common torture” method (5).

IN PRACTICE

Studies have found beating to be the most frequent and common physical torture method among survivors with some studies reporting nearly 100% exposure (3,4,6,7,8,9). Its use is not restricted to certain regions of the world. In a study that compared torture sequelae in six different countries – namely, Turkey, Bangladesh, Peru, Syria, Uganda and Iran – beatings were reported in every group (10). Another study among refugees from the Middle East also noted beatings across participants, irrespective of their nationality (5).

Some beating objects appear to be more commonly used worldwide while others are especially prevalent in specific countries. For instance, the use of fists, sticks and truncheons was observed in all six countries in the abovementioned study (10). However, whereas the use of batons was most common in Bangladesh, whipping with electric chords was most frequent in Iran and Syria. In Cameroon, the most commonly reported tools for beating were sticks, ropes, wires and guns (11). In Fiji, batons, police-belts and screw drivers were commonly used to beat (12). In a study among Rohingya refugees, participants described hitting with fists, rifle butts and flashlights as the most frequent beating methods (4).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

The list of health consequences resulting from beatings is extensive. The consequences depend on the site of the body involved and the intensity of the beatings. In the acute stage, beatings cause pain during and after the act. The pain may become chronic (4). Overall, physical trauma inflicted on someone through beatings will result in what is known as blunt force trauma which develops into one or a combination of four specific traumas: contusions, abrasions, lacerations, and fractures (13). Contusions (skin bruising) are the most common type of trauma following beatings (13). An example of a contusion is the tramline bruise which occurs when the skin surface is struck by blunt instruments (14).

However, the absence of an apparent bruise does not indicate there was no blunt trauma to a specific area (13). Beatings towards the torso or the head may be potentially lethal due to internal organ bleeding (13). Furthermore, severe beatings injuring the muscles may cause rhabdomyolysis (release of muscle fibre content into the bloodstream) which, in turn, may lead to kidney damage or failure (15).

Beatings may also cause abrasions, i.e. wearing of the skin, e.g. resulting from beatings with an object (13). Abrasions are often observed where the layer of skin is thin and over bony prominences. In some circumstances they may display a pattern reflecting the instrument that inflicted the injury.

Force applied to the body through beating may also give rise to open wounds – lacerations which consist of tearing or crushing of the skin and underlying tissue (13). Lacerations may leave scars, and, if untreated, are vulnerable to infection (13).

Beating may also cause fractures, the most common sites observed being the nasal bones, ribs, forearm bones (radius and ulna), hand, and spine (transverse process of vertebrae and the coccyx) (13).

Although beatings on any part of the body may cause serious sequelae, certain body parts are more vulnerable to lasting severe consequences. For instance, beatings or blows to the head can cause brain injury leading to numerous health consequences that include neurological, cognitive, somatic and psychological impairments (16). These impairments have been associated with continuous headaches, poor sleep, hearing loss, PTSD and the general inability to function as before (16).

Severe beatings may lead to neurogenic shock after damage to the nervous system or hypovolaemic shock due to loss of blood or body fluids. Both types of shock may in turn lead to organ failure (2).

Aside from the many physical health consequences of beating, individuals are likely to experience serious psychological difficulties. Pain, the experience of severe stress and lack of control have been associated with the development of mental problems (6). Additionally, as with all torture methods, beating can lead to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), behavioural and emotional problems, depression, sleep disturbances, anxiety, as well as challenges in social relationships amongst others (2,7).

CONCLUSION

Beating is a common ill-treatment and torture method. It is highly variable targeting different body parts and utilising a range of tools. Consequently, the effects of beating on the survivor are equally variable and can range from temporary pain to chronic disability, neurological damage or even death.

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