

Identifying Victims of Human Trafficking: What to Look for in a Healthcare Setting

Healthcare providers may come into contact with victims of human trafficking and have a unique opportunity to connect them with much needed support and services. Anyone in a healthcare setting may be in a position to recognize human trafficking – from clerical staff to lab technicians, nursing staff, ambulatory care, radiology staff, security personnel, case managers, and physicians.

The following is a list potential red flags and indicators that medical providers may see in a patient who may be a victim of human trafficking. Please note that this list is not exhaustive. Each indicator taken individually may not imply a trafficking situation and not all victims of human trafficking will exhibit these signs. However, the recognition of several indicators may point to the need for referrals and further assessment.

Red Flags and Indicators

General Indicators of Human Trafficking		
☐ Shares a scripted or inconsistent history ☐ Is unwilling or hesitant to answer questions about the injury or illness ☐ Is accompanied by an individual who does not let the patient speak for themselves, refuses to let the patient have privacy, or who interprets for them ☐ Evidence of controlling or dominating relationships (excessive concerns about pleasing a family member, romantic partner, or employer) ☐ Demonstrates fearful or nervous behavior or avoids eye contact ☐ Is resistant to assistance or demonstrates hostile behavior ☐ Is unable to provide his/her address ☐ Is not aware of his/her location, the current date, or time ☐ Is not in possession of his/her identification documents ☐ Is not in control of his or her own money ☐ Is not being paid or wages are withheld		
Labor Trafficking Indicators	Sex Trafficking Indicators	
☐ Has been abused at work or threatened with harm by an employer or supervisor ☐ Is not allowed to take adequate breaks, food, or water while at work ☐ Is not provided with adequate personal protective equipment for hazardous work ☐ Was recruited for different work than he/she is currently doing ☐ Is required to live in housing provided by employer ☐ Has a debt to employer or recruiter that he/she cannot pay off	☐ Patient is under the age of 18 and is involved in the commercial sex industry ☐ Has tattoos or other forms of branding, such as tattoos that say, “Daddy,” “Property of...,” “For sale,” etc. ☐ Reports an unusually high numbers of sexual partners ☐ Does not have appropriate clothing for the weather or venue ☐ Uses language common in the commercial sex industry	

Health Indicators and Consequences of Human Trafficking*

Physical Health Indicators	Mental Health Indicators
☐ Signs of physical abuse or unexplained injuries — Bruising — Burns — Cuts or wounds — Blunt force trauma — Fractures — Broken teeth — Signs of torture ☐ Neurological conditions — Traumatic brain injury — Headaches or migraines — Unexplained memory loss — Vertigo of unknown etiology — Insomnia — Difficulty concentrating ☐ Cardiovascularⁱⁱ/respiratoryⁱⁱⁱ conditions that appear to be caused or worsened by stress, such as: — Arrhythmia — High blood pressure — Acute Respiratory Distress ☐ Gastrointestinal conditions that appear to be caused or worsened by stress^{iv}, such as: — Constipation — Irritable bowel syndrome ☐ Dietary health issues — Severe weight loss — Malnutrition — Loss of appetite ☐ Reproductive issues — Sexually-transmitted infections — Genitourinary issues — Repeated unwanted pregnancies — Forced or pressured abortions — Genital trauma — Sexual dysfunction — Retained foreign body ☐ Substance use disorders ☐ Other health issues — Effects of prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures — Effects of prolonged exposure to industrial or agricultural chemicals — Somatic complaints	☐ Depression ☐ Suicidal ideation ☐ Self-harming behaviors ☐ Anxiety ☐ Post-traumatic stress disorder ☐ Nightmares ☐ Flashbacks ☐ Lack of emotional responsiveness ☐ Feelings of shame or guilt ☐ Hyper-vigilance ☐ Hostility ☐ Attachment disorders^v — Lack of or difficulty in engaging in social interactions — Signs of withdrawal, fear, sadness, or irritability ☐ Depersonalization or derealization^{vi} — Feeling like an outside observer of themselves, as if watching themselves in a movie — Emotional or physical numbness of senses — Feeling alienated from or unfamiliar with their surroundings — Distortions in perception of time ☐ Dissociation disorders^{vii} — Memory loss — A sense of being detached from themselves — A lack of a sense of self-identity, or switching between alternate identities — A perception of the people and things around them as distorted or unreal
	Social or Developmental Indicators ☐ Increased engagement in high risk behaviors, such as running away or early sexual initiation if a minor ☐ Trauma bonding with trafficker or other victims (e.g. Stockholm syndrome) ☐ Difficulty establishing or maintaining healthy relationships ☐ Delayed physical or cognitive development ☐ Impaired social skills

**This list of physical and mental health indicators of human trafficking is not exhaustive. Trafficking survivors may experience one or more of these indicators, none of these indicators, or health indicators not on this list. This list is intended to help you assess if a patient's condition may be a result of a trafficking-related trauma and should be considered in context.*

Victim Identification and Response

How do I conduct an assessment or exam with a potential victim of human trafficking?

Victims of trafficking do not often disclose their trafficking situation in clinical settings.^{viii} Therefore, it is critical for medical practitioners to be thoughtful about engaging patients, employing trauma-informed practices, and creating a space that is conducive for discussing human trafficking. Before beginning any conversation with a patient, assess the potential safety risks that may result from asking sensitive questions of the patient. Recognize that the goal of your interaction is not disclosure or rescue, but rather to create a safe, non-judgmental place that will help you identify trafficking indicators and assist the patient.

Recommendations for Assessments:

- Allow the patient to decide if they would feel more comfortable speaking with a male or female practitioner.
- If the patient requires interpretation, always utilize professional interpreters who are unrelated to the patient or situation.
- If the patient is accompanied by others, find a time and place to speak with the patient privately.
- Take time to build rapport with potential victims, or if you do not have the time yourself, find someone else on staff who can develop rapport with the patient.
- Ensure that the patient understands confidentiality policies and practices, including mandatory reporting laws.
- Use multidisciplinary resources, such as social workers, where available
- Refer to existing institutional protocols for victims of abuse/sexual abuse.
- You may contact the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) hotline for assistance in conducting an assessment and determining next steps if you have not already developed a protocol to respond to victims of human trafficking.

What should I do if I believe I have identified a victim of human trafficking?

Every situation of human trafficking is unique; it is important to use a victim-centered response. Not all victims of trafficking will be comfortable disclosing their situation, nor will all victims be ready to seek assistance from service providers, law enforcement, or even medical providers. Medical providers, however, have a unique opportunity to provide potential trafficking victims with information and options, while supporting them through the process of connecting with advocates or service providers if they are ready to report their situation.

If a patient has disclosed that they have been trafficked:

- Provide the patient with the NHTRC hotline number and encourage him/her to call if he/she wants help or wants to talk to someone. If the patient feels it is dangerous to have something with the number written on it you can have them memorize the number.
- In situations of immediate, life-threatening danger, follow your institutional policies for reporting to law enforcement. Whenever possible, make an effort to partner with the patient in the decision to contact law enforcement.
- Provide the patient with options for services, reporting, and resources. Ensure that safety planning is included in the discharge planning process.
- If the patient is a minor, follow mandatory state reporting laws and institutional policies for child abuse or serving unaccompanied youth.
- Ensure that any information regarding the patient's injuries or treatment is accurately documented in the patient's records. While documentation of abuse may be helpful in building a case against a trafficker, information about the victim can also be used against them in a court proceeding.

Am I obligated to report situations of human trafficking? If so, who should I contact?

Legal requirements regarding mandatory reporting of human trafficking may differ from state to state, and situations may require mandatory reporting under related statutes even if the situation is not human trafficking (e.g. child abuse or domestic violence). Refer to your local or state requirements regarding mandatory reporting. While contacting the NHTRC will not fulfill mandatory reporting requirements, the NHTRC can facilitate a report to specialized law enforcement trained to handle human trafficking cases.

When working with adults who have been trafficked, it is important to gain permission and consent from the patient before disclosing any personal information about the patient to others, including service providers. Furthermore, medical providers should be aware of how HIPAA regulations impact the ability to report potential trafficking situations on behalf of a patient. When contacting the NHTRC or connecting with local service providers, keep in mind any confidentiality obligations.

How can I utilize the National Human Trafficking Resource Center hotline to assist victims of trafficking?

The NHTRC offers confidential round-the-clock access to a safe space to report tips, seek services, and ask for help. The NHTRC is operated 24/7 and has access to over 200 languages through a tele-interpreting service. All communications with the NHTRC are strictly confidential to the extent permitted by law and callers need not disclose personal information in order to access services through the NHTRC. The NHTRC is also an excellent resource for healthcare institutions to help identify and connect with existing resources in their area as they begin the process of developing a response protocol for victims of human trafficking. Healthcare professionals can access the NHTRC for the following services:

Service Referrals: The NHTRC has a referral network of over 3,200 referral contacts, including anti-trafficking organizations, legal service providers, shelters, law enforcement, and local social service agencies that can assist victims of human trafficking.

Tip Reporting: The NHTRC has specialized local and national response protocols across the country for law enforcement and service providers. The NHTRC can facilitate a report to law enforcement contacts who are trained on trafficking and designated to respond to NHTRC hotline.

Training and Technical Assistance: The NHTRC also provides training and technical assistance on a wide range of human trafficking topics through calling the hotline and visiting the NHTRC's website. The NHTRC can also guide clinicians through an assessment with a potential victim.

The National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) maintains a database of service providers and resources throughout the United States, along with extensive training resources on a variety of topics related to human trafficking.

Report Online or Access Resources & Referrals: www.traffickingresourcecenter.org

Call: 1-888-373-7888 (24/7)

Email: nhtrc@polarisproject.org

Additional Resources

- [SOAR to Health and Wellness](#), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- [HEAL Trafficking](#), Health Professional Education, Advocacy, and Linkage
- [Understanding & Combating Human Trafficking as a Health, Social, & Economic Issue](#), Child Family Health International
- [Child Sex Trafficking Webinar Series for Healthcare Professionals](#), Children's Healthcare of Atlanta
- [Confronting Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Sex Trafficking of Minors in the U.S.](#), Institute of Medicine/National Research Council Report
- [Human Trafficking: Guidebook on Identification, Assessment, and Response in the Healthcare Setting](#), Massachusetts General and Massachusetts Medical Society
- [Caring for Trafficked Persons: A Guide for Health Providers](#), The International Organization for Migration and UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking
- [The Role of the Nurse in Combatting Human Trafficking](#), Donna Sabella in the *American Journal of Nursing*
- [Online Educational Modules for Healthcare Professionals: Christian Medical Dental Associations](#)

ⁱ [Caring for Trafficked Persons: Guidance for Health Providers](#), International Organization for Migration (IOM)

ⁱⁱ [Conditions](#), American Heart Association

ⁱⁱⁱ [All Diseases](#), American Lung Association

^{iv} [Diseases and Conditions](#), Cleveland Clinic

^v [Reactive Attachment Disorder: Symptoms](#), Mayo Clinic

^{vi} [Depersonalization-derealization Disorder: Symptoms](#), Mayo Clinic

^{vii} [Dissociative disorders: Symptoms](#), Mayo Clinic; [Dissociative Disorders](#), National Alliance on Mental Illness

^{viii} [Human Trafficking: Guidebook on Identification, Assessment, and Response in the Health Care Setting](#), Massachusetts General and Massachusetts Medical Society