

## **Identifying Victims of Human Trafficking What to Look for During a Medical Exam/Consultation**

The following is a list of potential red flags and indicators that can be useful in recognizing a potential victim of human trafficking. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list. Each indicator taken individually may not imply a trafficking situation and not all victims of human trafficking will exhibit these signs. However, recognition of several indicators may point toward the need for further investigation.

### **RED FLAGS AND INDICATORS**

#### **General Indicators that Can Apply to All Victims of Human Trafficking**

- Individual does not have any type of legal documentation – i.e., license or state issued identification for US Citizens; passport, Green Card, or other identification for foreign nationals
- Individual claims to be “just visiting” an area but is unable to articulate where he/she is staying or cannot remember addresses; the Individual does not know the city or state of his/her current location
- Individual has numerous inconsistencies in his/her story
- Someone is claiming to speak for, or on behalf of a victim – i.e. an interpreter, often of the same ethnic group, male or female; victim is not allowed to speak for him/herself
- Individual exhibits behaviors including “hyper-vigilance” or paranoia, fear, anxiety, depression, submission, tension and/or nervousness
- Individual exhibits a loss of sense of time or space
- Individual avoids eye contact
- Individual uses false identification papers – may not be victim’s real name
- Individual is not in control of his/her own money

#### **Specific Health Indicators**

The following indicators may present in the context of a physical exam or similar health assessment or treatment

- Malnourishment or generally poor health
- Signs of physical abuse – in particular, unexplained injuries or signs of prolonged abuse
  - Bruises
  - Black eyes
  - Burns
  - Cuts
  - Broken bones
  - Broken teeth
  - Multiple scars (including from electric prods)
- Evidence of a prolonged infection that could easily be treated through a routine physical/check up
- Addiction to drugs and/or alcohol
- Individual has no idea when his/her last medical exam was
- Lack of healthcare insurance – i.e. paying with cash

**This publication was made possible in part through Grant Number 90XR0012/02 from the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division, Office of Refugee Resettlement, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Division, Office of Refugee Resettlement, or HHS.**



### Specific Indicators that Apply to Sex Trafficking Victims

Victims of sex trafficking may exhibit a unique set of risk factors and warning signs, including the following: **SOURCE: Girls Education and Mentoring Services (GEMS)**

- The age of a individual has been verified to be under 18 and the individual is involved in the sex industry
- The age of the individual has been verified to be under 18 and the individual has a record of prior arrest(s) for prostitution
- Discrepancies in behavior and reported age – i.e. clues in behavior or appearance that suggest that the individual is underage, but he/she lies about his/her age
- Evidence of sexual trauma
- Multiple or frequent sexually transmitted infections (STIs), especially evidence of a lack of treatment for STIs
- Multiple or frequent pregnancies
- Individual reports an excessively large number of sexual partners, especially when it is not age-appropriate (i.e. 15 year old girl reporting dozens of sexual partners)
- Individuals who are under the age of 18 who express interest in, or may already be in, relationships with adults or older men
- Use of lingo or slang relating to the individual's involvement in prostitution – i.e. referring to a boyfriend as “Daddy” or talking about “the life”
- Evidence of controlling or dominating relationships – i.e. repeated phone calls from a “boyfriend” and/or excessive concern about displeasing a partner
- Individual is dressed in inappropriate clothing (i.e., lingerie or other attire associated with the sex industry)
- Presence of unexplained or unusual scar tissue – potentially from forced abortions
- Tattoos on the neck and/or lower back that the Individual is reluctant to explain – i.e. a man's name or initials (most often encountered with US citizen victims of sex trafficking)
- Other types of branding – i.e. cutting or burning
- Evidence that the victim has had to have sexual intercourse while on her monthly cycle – i.e. use of cotton balls or other products which leave residual fibers
- Family dysfunction – i.e. abuse in the home (emotional, sexual, physical), neglect, absence of a caregiver, or substance abuse – these are major risk factors for sex trafficking and can be important warning signs that the Individual might be a victim
- Individual may either be in crisis, or may downplay existing health problems or risks
- Individual may resist your help or demonstrate fear that the information he/she gives you will lead to arrest, placement in social services, return to family, or retribution from trafficker

## SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM HEALTH EFFECTS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The following is a list of typical physical and mental health costs associated with all forms of human trafficking. This list applies to both US citizen/domestic and Foreign National victims.

### Short term

- Higher risk behaviors (i.e., drug and alcohol abuse)
- Impaired judgment
- Emotional exhaustion
- Depersonalization
- Fear, anxiety, and nervousness
- Muscle tension

### Long term

- Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)<sup>ii</sup>
  - Persistent symptoms of increased arousal – i.e. difficulty falling or staying asleep, irritability or outbursts of anger, difficulty concentrating, exaggerated startle response
  - Intense distress/reactivity to internal/external cues that symbolize or resemble aspect of traumatic event
  - "Hyper-vigilance" or paranoia, fear, anxiety, depression, submission, tension and/or nervousness
- Trauma bonding
- Severe depression
- Suicidal ideation
- Spiritual questions
- Feelings of being mentally broken
- Multiple symptoms resulting from untreated STIs
- Sexual dysfunction
- Difficulty establishing/maintaining healthy relationships

## VICTIM IDENTIFICATION

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

- Utilize existing assessment and examination protocols for victims of abuse/sexual abuse
- Utilize existing culturally sensitive protocols
- Use age-appropriate language if working with minors<sup>iii</sup>
- If you ask about sexual history, be sure to distinguish between consensual experiences and non-consensual experiences<sup>iv</sup>
- If possible, choose a comfortable space which is conducive to confidentiality<sup>v</sup>
- If appropriate, separate the Individual from his/her belongings and escort/interpreter
  - The victim may be wearing/carrying some sort of tracking/communication device such as a GPS transmitter, cell phone or other small device – you can separate the victim from these devices by getting him/her into a gown and into an x-ray room<sup>vi</sup>
- If the Individual is a female, approach should be made by a female staff member, whether a psychologist, physician, social worker or female police officer not in uniform<sup>vii</sup>

**What do I do if I think I have identified a victim of human trafficking?**

- Be sensitive, every incident of human trafficking is different
- Make sure you are not putting yourself or the Individual in danger (i.e., take care to notice who is around when you are asking questions or providing resources)
- If you suspect that the victim is in immediate danger, notify the police
- Try to record as much information about the situation as possible – being careful not to put yourself or the individual in any danger
- Present outreach cards and/or hotline numbers for local anti-trafficking service providers or other anti-trafficking hotlines to suspected victims – give this information directly to the victim and only when he/she is alone
- Provide the Individual with the NHTRC hotline number and encourage him/her to call if he/she needs help or would like to talk to someone
- Call the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC) to report the incident or locate local victims' services: **1-888-373-7888**
- Visit the Polaris Project website for more information on human trafficking:  
[www.PolarisProject.org](http://www.PolarisProject.org)

*As a health practitioner, you are in a unique position to recognize, identify, and reach out to victims. This list is intended to be a guideline only and should be adapted to fit existing organizational protocols for interacting with potential victims of child abuse, violence, sexual assault and other related crimes. Health practitioners should familiarize themselves with social service providers in their area working on the issue of human trafficking and work with these agencies to create a protocol for responding to victims of trafficking.*

**For More Information Contact:**

National Human Trafficking Resource Center  
24 Hour National Hotline: 888.3737.888  
[nhtrc@PolarisProject.org](mailto:nhtrc@PolarisProject.org)

Polaris Project works to empower and mobilize people from diverse backgrounds and of all ages to take meaningful action against human trafficking. Register with [www.polarisproject.org/signup](http://www.polarisproject.org/signup) to receive regular updates on human trafficking in the United States.

---

i **SOURCE: Girls Education and Mentoring Services (GEMS). [Gems-girls.org](http://Gems-girls.org)**

ii **Ibid.**

iii **Ibid.**

iv **Ibid.**

v **Ibid.**

vi **SOURCE: Dr. Juliette Engel, MIRAMED. [www.miramed.org](http://www.miramed.org)**

vii **Ibid.**