

WHAT IS ELECTRICAL TORTURE?

Applying electricity to the body is a well-known form of torture. It has been recognized as a method of torture by the European Court of Human Rights and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Torture (1–3). Electric discharge weapons are described in another factsheet (4).

IN PRACTICE

In electrical torture, two contact points to a power source are applied to the body (one of the contact points may be earth). The current may be direct current (DC) from a generator (such as a stun gun or cattle prod), alternating current (AC) from a mains outlet, or pulsed direct current (PDC) from an electrical discharge weapon (5,6). The most common areas to apply the electrodes are the hands, feet, ears, nipples, mouth, and genitals (7). Water or gel are often used on the skin to reduce the resistance, thereby increasing the current and preventing electric burns from being detectable (7).

In a recent systematic review of 266 torture studies encompassing 103,604 individuals, electrical torture was found to be the second-most frequent method after beatings, practiced in at least 28 countries, mostly towards men (8). Electrical torture is often used in combination with other torture methods, such as fixed positions or suspension. One example is parilla torture, in which a victim is strapped to a metal frame while being subjected to electrical shock torture (9).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Electric current is a flow of electrons (ampere), running from high to low concentration. The potential concentration difference (voltage), and the resistance to the flow (ohm) determines the magnitude of the current (6). With increasing resistance, for instance dry skin or clothes, a higher voltage is required to overcome the resistance and uphold the same current.

When electricity is applied, the current runs between the two electrodes along the route of lowest resistance, potentially causing pain, tetanic muscle contraction, and tissue damage.

The damage caused depends on several factors including the type of current, the voltage, the tissue resistance, the duration of exposure, and the distance and pathway the current takes in the body (10). Current passing through tissue with high resistance, such as skin, bone and fat, leaves energy in the form of heat, which causes tissue damage and intense pain.

Electric current passing through large muscle groups may lead to painful contraction of the muscles, continuing contraction if AC or PDC is used. Secondary injuries may include falls, dislocation of joints, damage to the teeth or bite wounds (7). Electric current passing through the head may give rise to seizures, and current passing through the heart may result in a potentially fatal arrhythmia (10). Peripheral nerves may also be affected by the electric current resulting in transient sensory and motor deficits (11).

The electric current may also give rise to electric burns in the shape of small, reddish-brown circular lesions that may eventually result in a dark scar (7). Scarring may also occur in soft tissues like for instance the urethra, leading to strictures (9). One example of rupture of the tympanic membrane following electric shock on the membrane itself and resulting in rupture and hearing loss has also been reported (12).

A range of long-term sequelae due to man-made electrical injury has been described. These include neurological sequelae such as permanent nerve damage on the site of the current; physical sequelae such as diffuse pain; and psychological sequelae such as behavioral changes and difficulty with verbal memory and attention, but also severe psychiatric conditions like PTSD (11,13).

CONCLUSION

Electrical torture is the second-most frequent torture method and practiced in at least 28 countries. It may have serious health consequences, both in the acute state and in the long term. It may be difficult to document that electric torture took place because the signs may be very subtle, temporary, or even missing.

References

1. ECtHR. Akkoc v. Turkey [Internet]. 2000 [cited 2025 Jan 2]. Available from: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-58905>
2. ECtHR. POLONSKIY v. RUSSIA [Internet]. 2009 [cited 2025 Feb 7]. Available from: <https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/rus#%7B%22itemid%22:%5B%22001-91788%22%7D>
3. Manfred Nowak, UN Special Rapporteur on torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Mission to China [Internet]. 2006 Oct. Available from: https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/570962/files/E_CN-4_2006_6_Add-6-EN.pdf
4. DIGNITY - Danish Institute Against Torture. Health Fact sheet #3 ELECTRIC DISCHARGE WEAPONS (EDWs) [Internet]. Report No.: Health Fact sheet #3. Available from: <https://dignity.dk/wp-content/uploads/electric-discharge-weapons-factsheet-english.pdf>
5. Peel M, Iacopino V. The Medical documentation of torture. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press; 2008.
6. Fish RM, Geddes LA. Conduction of Electrical Current to and Through the Human Body: A Review. Eplasty [Internet]. 2009 Oct 12 [cited 2025 Jan 2];9:e44. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2763825/>
7. United Nations. Istanbul Protocol: manual on the effective investigation and documentation of torture and other cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment. Rev 2. New York & Geneva: United Nations; 2022. 225 p. (Professional training series).
8. Milewski A, Weinstein E, Lurie J, Lee A, Taki F, Pilato T, et al. Reported Methods, Distributions, and Frequencies of Torture Globally: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis. JAMA Netw Open. 2023 Oct 2;6(10):e2336629.
9. Rouf Khawaja A, Dar M, Dar Y, Magray J, Sheikh T, Zahur S. Parrilla urethra: A sequelae of electric shock torture to genitals in men. A 40 case series in Kashmir (India). Torture Q J Rehabil Torture Vict Prev Torture. 2020;30(1):40–8.
10. Dzhokic G, Jovchevska J, Dika A. Electrical injuries: Etiology, Pathophysiology and Mechanism of Injury. Maced J Med Sci. 2008 Dec 15;54–8.
11. Wesner ML, Hickie J. Long-term sequelae of electrical injury. Can Fam Physician Med Fam Can. 2013 Sep;59(9):935–9.
12. Hoffman KE. Berber language ideologies, maintenance, and contraction: Gendered variation in the indigenous margins of Morocco. Lang Commun [Internet]. 2006 Apr;26(2):144–67. Available from: <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=psych&AN=2006-04276-003&site=ehost-live>
13. Alqassab S, Mathieu L. Torture-induced hand electrical injury: A case report. J Forensic Leg Med. 2020 Nov 21;77:102085.

Written by: Jens Modvig and Marie Brasholt with contribution from Ergun Cakal and Maha Aon.

March 2025

For questions and comments, please contact: factsheets@dignity.dk