

DIGNITY Fact Sheet Collection

HEALTH #11 SUSPENSION

WHAT IS SUSPENSION?

Suspension refers to a type of positional torture where the individual is hung or suspended by the wrists, ankles, arms or hair (1–3). The victim can be suspended for a period varying from minutes to hours or even days (4). Suspension torture is often combined with other forms of torture, such as beating and/or electrical torture (5,6). Suspension is among the most common and oldest documented torture methods. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture lists “suspension in various positions” as a method of torture (4) and the European Court of Human Rights considered cases of suspension as torture (7). Further, the Nelson Mandela Rules stipulate that restraints (often used in suspension torture) are not to be used for disciplinary purposes (Rule 43-2) and specify strict conditions to be fulfilled if restraints are to be used for non-disciplinary purposes (Rule 47-2) (8).

IN PRACTICE

Suspension is practiced in several ways, often including the victim being suspended by the extremities with a form of ligature (3,9). Cross suspension is applied by spreading the arms and tying them to a horizontal bar. Butchery suspension is fixation of hands upwards, either together or individually. Reverse butchery suspension consists of fixation of the feet upward and the head downward (3,9). Parrot perch is a form of suspension where the wrists are bound together in front of the body, the arms passed over the knees and a pole thrust behind the knees (3,9,10). This type of suspension has been commonly used in many Latin American countries but has also been documented in other countries (11). Reverse suspension (Palestinian suspension/hanging) is a well described variant, which is applied by suspending the victim with the forearms bound together behind the back at 90°, the elbows flexed, and the forearms tied to a horizontal bar (3,9,10). In some cases, the victim has heavy weights tied to the legs (3) which are lowered for brief recovery periods (8). In general suspension is reported more frequently for men than women (12). The geographical distribution of this torture method is wide, but the prevalence varies across countries and time (3).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Global Suspension torture can cause intense pain, and some positions may reduce the blood supply to the brain (13), both situations potentially leading the victim to lose consciousness (3). Depending on the type of suspension applied, it can also cause difficulty breathing or even death by asphyxiation (6), and reverse butchery suspension has been described to cause suffocation as fluids block the nasal passage and mouth (14). Death from prolonged suspension is, however, poorly researched (4).

Ligatures used for suspension (ropes, cable ties, cables, chains and handcuffs) can lead to marks on the skin of the victims’ wrists and/or ankles as well as underlying tissue damage resulting in circular scars around arms and legs (2,3).

Tight ligatures may also lead to reduced or loss of blood flow and severe damage to blood vessels. Ischemic necrosis of the hands including the development of dry gangrene has been described (4) as has brain damage with reduced executive functioning (14). The parrot perch suspension can cause neurovascular damage, deep venous thrombosis (blood clot in a deep vein) and subsequent pulmonary thromboembolism (blockage of lung artery) (10). These conditions are potentially fatal.

Finally, tight strapping can result in nerve injury (5). Full suspension of an average-sized man by the wrists causes permanent nerve damage after about fifteen minutes as a result of both compression and traction. If the victim is heavier, the damage can occur more rapidly (14). Peripheral nerve damage can result in acute or chronic motor, sensory and reflex dysfunction (3).

Reverse hanging concentrates the body weight on the shoulder joint and can cause major damage to the shoulder joint complex: Dislocation, hemarthrosis (bleeding into joint), brachial plexus injury (damage of the nerves that supply the skin and musculature of shoulders, arms and hands) (4,10). The victims may be unable to raise their arms due to the nerve damage which in turn may lead to extensive oedema (swelling) of the hands (4). Suspension may also cause damage to muscles of the shoulder girdle and prolonged suspension can cause muscle necrosis of the regional muscles which in turn may lead to damage of the kidneys (4).

CONCLUSION

Suspension torture encompasses a range of positions. This form of torture may cause severe, and sometimes irreversible, health consequences depending on a range of variables including the specific position and length of time held in the position.

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