

FACULTY OF FORENSIC & LEGAL MEDICINE
of the Royal College of Physicians of London



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Non-Fatal Strangulation

Institute for Addressing Strangulation

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What we will cover...

1. Institute For Addressing Strangulation (IFAS) & New Offence in England & Wales
2. What is Non-Fatal Strangulation (NFS)?
3. Signs & Symptoms
4. Long term effects
5. What can we do

Institute for Addressing Strangulation (IFAS)

- Set up in October 2022, following implementation of the new offence of Strangulation and Suffocation on the 7th June 2022
- IFAS sits with the Faculty of Forensic & Legal Medicine (FFLM), in partnership with
 - SafeLives
 - Bangor University
- Funded by the Home Office

The Institute will be focused on addressing strangulation by:

- Reducing the incidence of strangulation and suffocation in the UK
- Training
- Directory of trainers and experts
- Curating and creating free resources
- Co-ordinating strangulation-related research

New Offence in England & Wales

Strangulation or Suffocation

- (1) A person (“A”) commits an offence if -
 - (a) A intentionally strangles another person (“B”), or
 - (b) A does any other act to B that -
 - (i) affects B’s ability to breathe, and
 - (ii) constitutes battery of B.

- (2) It is a defence to an offence under this section for A to show that B consented to the strangulation or other act.

- (3) **But subsection (2) does not apply if -**
 - (a) B suffers serious harm as a result of the strangulation or other act, and
 - (b) A either -
 - (i) intended to cause B serious harm, or
 - (ii) was reckless as to whether B would suffer serious harm.

New Offence in England & Wales

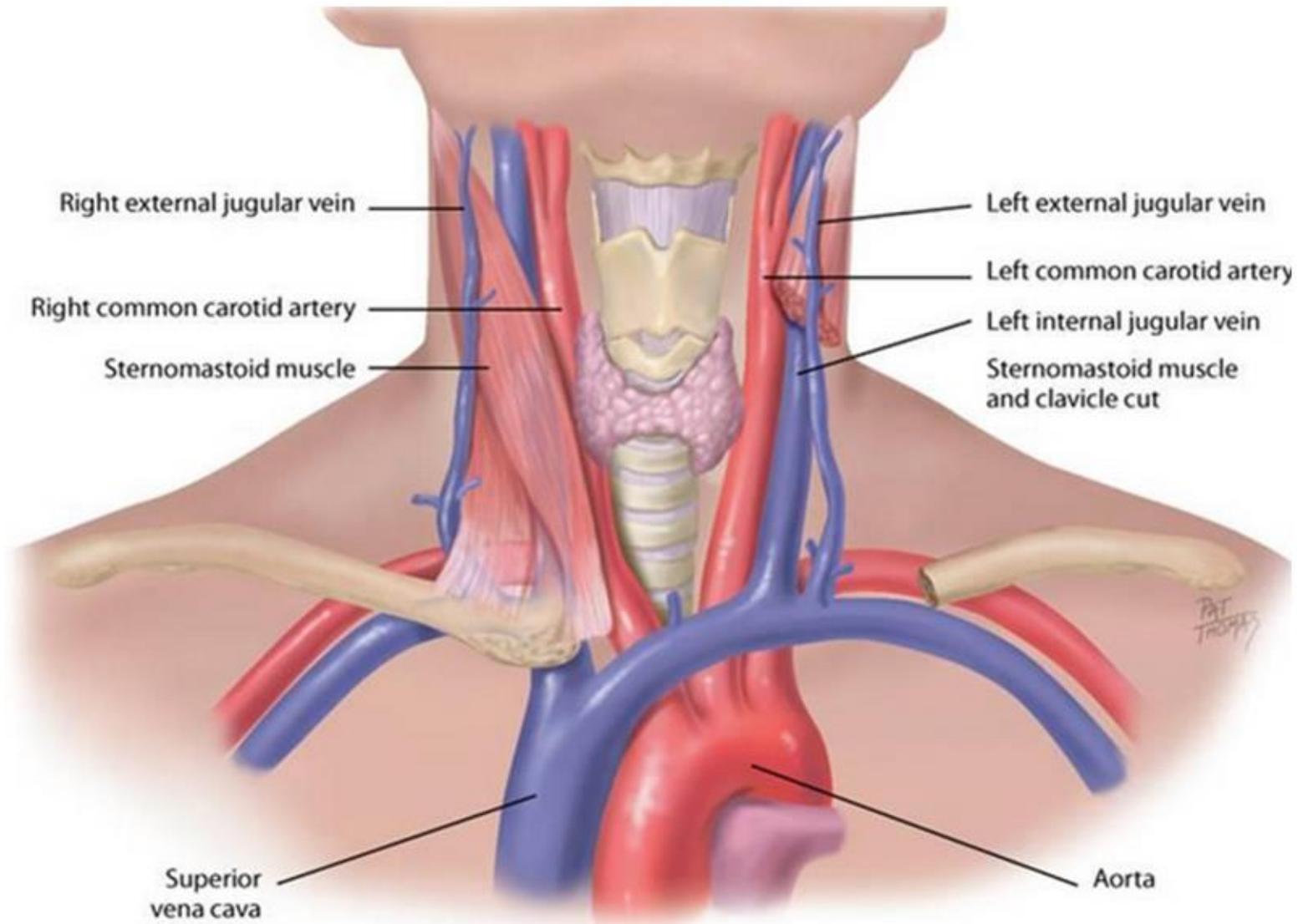
- Where there are no physical signs cases can be prosecuted on the account of the victim alone and the law does not impose a requirement for corroboration.
- Strangulation may be part of a wider pattern of coercive and controlling behaviour.
- Offence also applies where strangulation or suffocation has been committed ***abroad by a British national***
- If guilty of the offence they could face up to 5 years imprisonment and or a fine or both

What is Non-Fatal Strangulation (NFS)?

- The obstruction of blood vessels and/or airway by external pressure to the neck
- Resulting in decreased oxygen supply to the brain
- *Strangulation is different to suffocation, as suffocation is due to obstruction of the airway at the nose or mouth; Suffocation can have similar effects on the body and should be assessed and considered for charging in the same way as strangulation.*

What is Non-Fatal Strangulation (NFS)?

- Strangulation is the obstruction of blood vessels and/or airway by external pressure to the neck resulting in decreased oxygen supply to the brain.
- There are two main types of blood vessels in the neck:
 - Arteries - taking blood, rich in oxygen, away from the heart and lungs up to the brain.
 - Veins carry de-oxygenated blood away from the brain back to the heart where it can be pumped back to the lungs to pick up more oxygen and repeat the cycle.
- Pressure to the neck can cause:
 - Obstruction of the arteries leads to lack of oxygen reaching the brain (hypoxia) – cell death and brain damage.
 - Obstruction of the veins leads to increased pressure in the blood vessels of the head as the arteries continue to take blood to the brain but the return route to the heart is blocked therefore stopping the blood from flowing - The pressure within the blood vessels rises and can cause some in the head, face or brain to burst - Burst blood vessels near the skin surface may be seen as petechial haemorrhages (small pinprick sized bruises) or subconjunctival haemorrhages in the eyes (the whites of the eyes may be bright red).
- Obstruction of the windpipe (trachea) will reduce airflow in and out of the body resulting in decreased oxygen and increased carbon dioxide blood levels.



Language & Mechanisms

- The term “**Choking**” is often used to describe strangulation - “Choking” by definition is the mechanical obstruction of the windpipe (trachea) by an object or piece of food. Victims may use other phrases too such as ‘*throttled me*’ or ‘*I couldn’t breathe*’ it is therefore important for professionals to clarify what has occurred and what is meant by the victim.
- Mechanisms include - Chokehold or head lock, Ligature, Hanging, Pressure on the neck from a foot or knee.
- All of these methods cause external pressure on the neck causing partial or complete obstruction of the blood vessels or windpipe (trachea) and could damage the brain, and quickly.

Is it Obvious if Someone has been Strangled?

In a study of 300 cases 50% of survivors of strangulation had no visible markings to the neck and 25% only minor injuries*

Unlike other forms of physical violence such as punching or kicking, NFS frequently **leaves little in the way of observable injury yet** can result in serious physical and mental health consequences.

- Lack of injury does not remove the risk of serious injury, long term physical and psychological implications and risk of death.
- Important that anyone coming into contact with survivors understand this.

**Strack GB et al. Violence: Recognition, Management and Prevention (2001). A Review of 300 attempted strangulation cases. Part 1: Criminal Legal Issues. J Emerg Med. 21 (3). 303-9*

Signs and symptoms of strangulation/suffocation.

Marks to look for: scratches/grazes/wounds/redness/bruises
petechiae= very small red, brown or purple spots, might look like a rash

stroke, fit, lost consciousness,
difficulty breathing, nausea,
balance/co-ordination problems

confusion, hallucinations, disorientated, dizzy,
sluggish, memory loss, agitation, aggressiveness,
concentration problems

loss of sensation or strength / weakness of extremities / limpness /muscle spasms

Head: bumps (eg. from hit or fall)/ bald spots from hair pulling /headache/
feel pressure in head/petechiae on scalp

Face: marks, appearance
changed, facial drooping,
bloody or pinched nose

Eye: marks, bloody, marked
or droopier lids, changes in
vision, sensitive to light

Ear: Bleeding inside, bruising
behind, petechiae inside or
out, hearing changes, sensitive
to sound

Mouth: marks inside, jaw
pain, swollen lip/tongue

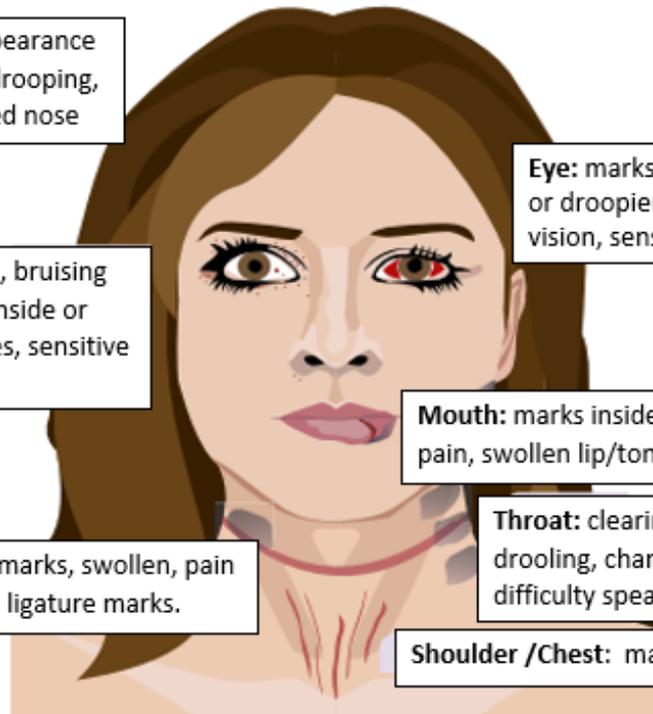
Throat: clearing, sore, coughing,
drooling, changed voice, pain/
difficulty speaking/swallowing

Neck/Under Chin: marks, swollen, pain
if moved/ touched, ligature marks.

Shoulder /Chest: marks

Hands: marks, blood or skin under fingernails, broken nails

incontinent - urine or faeces



Reminder

Many victims will not have any visible marks to the neck

Cases can be prosecuted on victim testimony alone

Cases should never be closed simply because they are 'word on word' as there is no legal requirement for corroboration.

Potential Long-Term Effects - Physical

- Cardiac arrest
- Stroke
- Miscarriage
- Speech disorders
- Seizures
- Paralysis
- Other forms of long-term brain injury

Researchers at Bangor University and North Wales Brain Injury Service, 2020 - Bichard H et al (2020) The neuropsychological outcomes of non-fatal strangulation in domestic and sexual violence Neuropsychological Rehabilitation

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/CKNRA22XXXKG9PK2XDRA/full?target=10.1080/09602011.2020.1868537>.

Potential Long-term Effects - Psychological

- PTSD
- Depression
- Suicidality
- Insomnia
- Dissociation
- Increased Shame
- Hypervigilance

NFS as a Predictor of Future Lethality

- NFS is an important risk factor for homicide of women.
 - **6x more likely to be an attempted homicide victim**
 - **7x more likely to be a completed homicide victim**

Glass et al (2008). 'Non-fatal strangulation is an important risk factor for homicide of women'
Journal of Emergency Medicine.

- Femicide Census - **second most common method of killing** used in 20% of killings, second only to stabbing.
- DHR Analysis (published March 2022) Strangulation was method of killing in 25% of cases.

NFS and Power & Control

- The act of NFS is way of demonstrating power and control
- Survivors of NFS will do their best to avoid it again, thereby handing over power to the offender.
- NFS has been described as the domestic abuse “equivalent of **water boarding**” - both leave few marks immediately afterwards, can lead to loss of consciousness and are used to assert dominance and authority over the life of the other. *NFS, A Human Rights Issue, Sorrenson, Joshi and Sivitz 2014*

Minimising NFS

- **Police** - NFS previously charged as 'common assault', but the DA Act has introduced the new offence of strangulation or suffocation.
- **Professionals** – not aware of the dangers and new law.
- **Victims** – “they didn't really choke me, they just had me in a headlock and I couldn't breathe”

What Can We Do?

- When looking at question 18 on a DASH regarding strangulation with a victim, if the person has said they lost consciousness, ask them if the abuser was in the room when they came round, as this may help paint a picture regarding the abusers attitude towards their behaviour.
- If you have a yes for question 18, consider assessing them as HIGH risk of Serious Harm, because of everything shared about NFS, especially if they lost consciousness.