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Sexual assault

A study in French-speaking Switzerland reveals significant and persistent psychological, physical and sexual impacts

A large multicentre study, with prospective follow-up over 12 months, conducted between 2022 and 2024 in French-speaking Switzerland, makes an alarming finding: the consequences of sexual assault persist for the majority of people well beyond the acute phase, with psychological, somatic and sexual disorders still present a year after the event. The [study](#) and its [summary](#) are available online.

This survey was coordinated by the Geneva University Hospital (HUG) in collaboration with the Lausanne University Hospital (CHUV), the Valais Hospital and five public hospitals in the canton of Vaud. It is the second phase of a project launched after a [retrospective study](#) conducted between 2018 and 2021, funded by the Swiss Federal Office for Gender Equality (BFEG) and the HUG. By connecting the immediate findings (retrospective phase) with the medium and long-term developments (prospective phase), the study offers an unprecedented view of the consequences of sexual assault in French-speaking Switzerland.

New insights into victims' experiences

Of the 623 sexual assault reports made by participating hospitals between November 2022 and December 2024, 454 met the criteria for inclusion. Of these, 178 (39%) agreed to participate in the study, which introduced systematic follow-up at 3 and 12 months for the first time, a major methodological advance in the Swiss landscape. Almost all these people (177) identified as women and one person as a trans man.

As frequently observed in longitudinal studies of people subjected to sexual assault, the participation rate decreased during follow-up, with 85 participants at 3 months (48% of the initial group) and 49 at 12 months (28%).

Compelling results

Sexual assault constitutes a lasting psychological trauma. One year after the event, nearly six in ten (57%) people have significant anxiety, seven in ten (71%) suffer

from depression and nearly seven in ten (68%) have probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Assault has a major impact on intimate life. Among sexually active people, more than six in ten (63%) report sexual dysfunction after one year with disorders of desire, arousal and orgasm.

One year after the attack, physical symptoms, such as chronic pain, gastrointestinal disorders, sleep disorders, persistent fatigue or migraines continue to impact more than half of the people followed.

Finally, a high proportion of those in the study (61%) report having already been confronted with sexual assault, which confirms the high risk of this occurring again. In addition, more than four in ten people (44%) had a pre-existing medical or psychiatric condition that could increase their overall vulnerability and influence their health trajectory after the attack.

According to Prof. Jasmine Abdulcadir, associate physician, head of the obstetrics and gynaecology emergency unit at the HUG and principal investigator for the study, "these data show that sexual assault constitutes a significant and lasting trauma, largely underestimated up to now due to the lack of longitudinal studies. They call for action, because sexual assault is an event with multiple, deep and lasting consequences, which require prevention and coordinated long-term follow-up, and provision of information to the people concerned and their families and friends."

Continuity with the 2018–2021 retrospective study

The retrospective study carried out at the HUG and the CHUV made it possible, for the first time, to describe 740 cases of sexual assault and to establish the sociodemographic and clinical profile of patients consulting in the emergency department.

The prospective study confirms several major findings, namely that the majority of people who have experienced sexual assault know their attacker, most often a friend, acquaintance or intimate partner – a result identical to that of the retrospective study. Assaults occur mainly in private places, including the home of the person or of the aggressor. Most people (81%) consult within 72 hours. The rates and distribution of physical and genito-anal lesions are similar. Alcohol consumption is reported in nearly seven out of ten cases (69%).

A reinforced medico-legal system

The study has also been extended geographically, and the representativeness of the results has increased, as it now includes the Hôpital du Valais and all the public hospitals in the canton of Vaud that share the same type of forensic medical care. The system has also been strengthened by the inter-cantonal [information campaign](#)

inspired by the retrospective study. Ticino's forthcoming participation represents a key step towards a future national platform.

Another new feature of this prospective phase is the introduction of the electronic medico-legal record (eCAS) at the HUG. This standardised tool improves data quality and consistency and has the potential to become a national model.

These developments strengthen the capacity of institutions to detect early, accurately document and sustainably monitor patients after sexual assault.

Strong implications for prevention, care and public policies

The results emphasise the need to strengthen specialised psychological follow-up, particularly in sites that do not yet have dedicated structures such as the Interdisciplinary Unit for Medicine and Prevention of Violence (UIMPV) at the HUG. They call for the standardisation of care pathways in the cantons to ensure equitable and trauma-informed care. They emphasise the importance of training front-line staff, including through simulation. Finally, these results reinforce the importance of informing patients about the potential consequences of assault and the resources available.

A national turning point in the understanding and management of sexual violence

This study encourages the implementation of ambitious public policies within the framework of the Swiss National Action Plan for the Istanbul Convention (2022–2026) and constitutes the basis for the creation of a French-speaking registry of sexual assaults recorded by emergency departments, a genuine tool for public health and justice.

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