Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Evaluation of the Abdomen in the Setting of Suspected Child Abuse

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Abusive intra-abdominal injuries are less common than other types of injuries, such as fractures and bruises, identified in victims of child physical abuse, but they can be deadly. No single abdominal injury is pathognomonic for abuse, but some types and constellations of intra-abdominal injuries are seen more frequently in abused children. Identification of intra-abdominal injuries can be important clinically or forensically. Injuries that do not significantly change clinical management can still elevate a clinician's level of concern for abuse and thereby influence subsequent decisions affecting child protection efforts. Abusive intra-abdominal injuries can be clinically occult, necessitating screening laboratory evaluations to inform decisions regarding imaging. Once detected, consideration of developmental abilities of the child, type and constellation of injuries, and the forces involved in any provided mechanism of trauma are necessary to inform assessments of plausibility of injury mechanisms and level of concern for abuse. Here we describe the clinical, laboratory and imaging evaluation of the abdomen in the setting of suspected child abuse.

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