Emergency Department Triage Chief Complaints Among Children Evaluated for Physical Abuse Concerns

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Objectives: The aims of this study were to describe chief complaints provided at emergency department triage for young children ultimately given a diagnosed with injuries concerning for physical abuse and compare chief complaints by hospital child protection team assessment (abuse most likely, accident most likely, undetermined) among children younger than 2 years who were the subject of a report to child protective services.

Methods: This is a retrospective review of children evaluated by the child protection team at an urban children's hospital over a 5-year period. Children younger than 2 years who were the subject of a report to child protective services for suspected physical abuse were included. Chief complaints noted in emergency department triage notes were categorized as follows: 1, medical sign or symptom; 2, accidental trauma incident; 3, identified injury; 4, concern for abuse; or 5, multiple unrelated complaints. Child protection team assessments were categorized as follows: 1, abuse most likely; 2, accident most likely; or 3, undetermined. We used descriptive statistics and tests of association (? 2 , Fisher exact, Kruskal-Wallis).

Results: Median age of the 422 children included was 4.9 months. Child protection team assessment was abuse most likely in 44%, accident most likely in 23%, and undetermined in 34%. Chief complaints in the overall sample were 39% medical, 29% trauma incident, 16% injury, 10% abuse concern, and 6% multiple unrelated. When the abuse most likely and accident most likely groups were compared, medical chief complaints were more common in the former (47% vs 19%, $P < 0.001$), whereas trauma incident chief complaints were more common in the latter (19% vs 64%, $P < 0.001$). Most common medical complaints in the abuse most likely group were altered mental status, abnormal limb use, swelling, pain, apnea, and vomiting.

Conclusion: Many children found to have injuries concerning for abuse (47%) present without mention of trauma, injury, or abuse concern as part of the chief complaint. Our findings suggest important topics to include in training physicians about recognition of abuse.

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