

Introduction

Strangulation is defined as asphyxia by closure of the blood vessels and/or air passages of the neck as a result of external pressure on the neck. There are three main categories: hanging, ligature strangulation and manual strangulation¹. Non-fatal strangulation (NFS) is where the patient has not died.

It is estimated that more than 20,000 victims in the UK experience strangulation each year and one in eleven adult sexual assault victims were strangled during the assault². Patients may also have self-harmed by strangulation. In England & Wales, strangulation (including hanging) and suffocation are the most common methods of suicide³.

These guidelines on the clinical management of NFS have been developed by an Intercollegiate Group in response to the increased understanding of its dangers and prevalence and in the absence of existing UK guidelines.

The four-week timescale for non-symptomatic patients that has been chosen is a balance of the current evidence base regarding risk of significant vascular injury, with its life changing potential, versus pragmatism⁴. The Red Flags in Box B are to guide clinicians in identifying those patients most likely to benefit from imaging. As more evidence becomes available this list will be reviewed.

Complementary guidelines for the clinical management of non-fatal strangulation presenting in other settings are planned, as are paediatric guidelines.

We would welcome feedback on the guidelines via contact@ifas.org.uk

Aims of the guidelines

- The guidance is aimed at clinicians in acute and emergency care services.
- It has been developed to guide the investigation and management, including appropriate imaging requests, of adult and adolescent patients who have experienced non-fatal strangulation within the last 4 weeks, or are presenting beyond 4 weeks but are symptomatic.
- As for any patient, it is necessary from the outset to ensure urgent assessment +/- resuscitative treatment as required. Remember, patients may have other injuries and/or medical conditions alongside the strangulation.