

# Virginity Testing

*International Association of Forensic Nurses*

## Statement of Problem

Virginity testing is a human rights violation and occurs in multiple societies and cultures as a form of gender-based discrimination and violence (WHO, 2018). Virginity testing involves an examination of the female genitalia, often by a health care professional, intended to correlate the appearance and status of the hymen in women or girls with previous sexual intercourse (Independent Forensic Expert Group, 2015; Olson & Garcia-Moreno, 2017). Visual inspection of the external genitalia is often combined with a “two-finger test”, involving the insertion of one or more fingers into the vagina to assess the size of the vaginal (hymenal) opening (Independent Forensic Expert Group, 2015). Health care professionals or untrained individuals conduct these examinations and conclude whether women or often young girls have experienced consensual sex or sexual assault/abuse (WHO, 2018). Examinations are often performed by force without the individual’s consent and cooperation (Mishori et al., 2019). Virginity testing is traumatic, painful, and humiliating (WHO, 2018).

In many patriarchal cultures, virginity is an important societal norm that determines the honor of the individual woman or girl, her family and community, and the State (Frank et al., 1999; Crosby et al., 2020). Virginity testing examinations are conducted under a variety of circumstances and settings: prior to marriage to establish virginity; to disprove or prove an allegation of sexual violence; to legally assess the allegation of a woman or girl not being a virgin in the absence of bleeding on her wedding night; and to intimidate political activists and detainees. In certain countries, the State has been known to forcibly conduct virginity testing when women or girls are accused of adultery or prostitution (Crosby, et al., 2020).

Even though the World Health Organization published a joint statement with the United Nation’s Human Rights Office and UN Women in 2018 officially denouncing the practice of virginity testing and calling for the elimination of this human rights violation, virginity testing remains a common practice in various regions of the world. Virginity testing is culturally accepted and frequently conducted in Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Jordan, Palestine, South Africa, Swaziland, Turkey, and Zimbabwe (WHO, 2018). Globalization has resulted in increased virginity testing among some communities in Canada and Europe (Crosby et al., 2020). As recently as 2016, a member of the Egyptian parliament called for virginity tests for female university entrants to discourage premarital sex (Crosby et al., 2020). Indonesia requires a virginity test when an unmarried woman applies for a job in the military (Crosby et al., 2020). Although officially banned in Afghanistan, virginity testing remains widespread, both officially by the State, and unofficially by family request (Crosby et al., 2020). In the United States, virginity testing occurs in non-immigrant populations, such as Orthodox Jewish communities and certain fundamentalist Christian groups (Crosby et al., 2020).

Virginity testing is not supported by any medical evidence. Decades of research have solidified that the appearance and condition of the hymen and other genital structures cannot diagnose consensual sexual intercourse, sexual abuse/assault, or other forms of sexual violence (Adams, Farst, & Kellogg, 2018; Drocton et al., 2008; Gallion, Milam, & Littrel, 2016; Heger et al., 2003; Heger et al., 2002; Sachs & Chu, 2002).

Virginity testing has been linked to a variety of negative short-term and long-term physical and psychosocial consequences. The examination is often painful and traumatic as damage to the genitalia

with resulting bleeding and infection can occur (WHO, 2018). Virginit testing is commonly performed under unhygienic conditions potentially increasing the risk of infections including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (LeRoux, 2006). Psychological trauma can also result from virginit testing. The examination violates the individual's physical integrity, autonomy, and privacy, especially when performed without consent (WHO, 2018). The exam can result in significant negative emotions such as intense anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, powerlessness, humiliation, and panic (Crosby, 2020).

“Failing” the exam and being labeled a “non-virgin” can result in devastating outcomes for the individual. Punishment for failing virginit testing can include beatings; sexual assaults, including gang rape; and/or denial of food (Leclerc-Madlala, 2006; Shalboub-Kevorkian, 2005). Women have been murdered as the result of failing virginit testing, in some instances as “honor killings” by family members (Crosby et al., 2020). Women have committed suicide after failing virginit tests (Crosby et al., 2020). Additionally, failing the examination can result in educational, marriage, and employment discrimination (WHO, 2018). Ostracism from family and the community can also occur leaving these girls and women at heightened vulnerability for violence, including forced prostitution and human trafficking (George, 2008; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005). The WHO (2018) states “virginit testing is detrimental to a woman's or girl's physical integrity and psychosocial well-being and is likely to cause long-lasting damage.”

### **Association Position**

The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) asserts that:

1. Virginit testing violates an individual's human rights.
2. Virginit testing is an example of gender-based discrimination.
3. Virginit testing is a form of sexual violence.
4. Virginit testing cannot accurately determine a woman or girl's sexual activity status.
5. Virginit testing cannot reliably tell if a woman or girl has experienced sexual abuse or assault.
6. Virginit testing is not supported by any healthcare or medical evidence.
7. Virginit testing can result in significant physical, psychological, and social consequences.
8. Health care providers must cease performing virginit testing examinations.
9. Health care providers must educate patients, families, communities, and governments regarding the inaccuracies of virginit testing.
10. Health care providers must advocate for vulnerable individuals by educating individuals, families, communities, and governments regarding the negative short-term and long-term consequences of virginit testing.

### **Rationale**

As the largest international forensic nursing association, the IAFN is committed to upholding human rights and abolishing sexual violence. The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) declares that virginit testing constitutes a human rights violation and is a traumatizing, sexually violent practice. IAFN calls for the global elimination of virginit testing.

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