

WHAT IS FALANGA?

Falanga is the most common term for repeated application of blunt trauma to the feet or, rarely, to the palm(s) of the hand or the hips. Synonyms for falanga are *falaka*, *falaqa*, *karma*, *arma*, *bastinad*, and *basinado* (1).

Falanga has been recognized as a form of torture by the European Court of Human Rights “when the purpose is to punish or to obtain a confession” (2–4) and is further listed as a method of torture by the UN Special Rapporteur (5).

IN PRACTICE

A Danish study from 2008 shows 40% of torture survivors among asylum seekers had been subjected to falanga (6). A Swedish study from 2009 found that 45% of torture survivors among asylum seekers had been subjected to falanga (7). Both studies show a higher frequency of falanga in men.

The use of falanga has been documented in the last two decades in Afghanistan, Algeria, Argentina, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Chile, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Greece, India, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritius, Nepal, Palestine, Peru, Spain, Somalia, South Korea, Syria, Chechnya, Turkey and Uganda (1).

There are two variations of falanga. In the first one, the victim lies on their stomach with the legs bent, the soles of the feet facing upwards. In the second one, the victim lies on their back with their feet bound by the ankles tightly to a pole. The pole may be suspended or held by two men, with the soles of the feet exposed outward. Some victims are forced to walk around in between or after the blows to increase the impact of the falanga (1,8).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Victims of falanga often report impaired walking, including alterations in gait pattern and reduced stride and walking speed potentially leading to chronic disability (8,9). Fractures of the feet bones, specifically the tarsal, metatarsal, and phalanx bones are uncommon, but do occur (10).

Two types of pain are usually described:

1. A deep, dull cramping pain in the feet, which becomes more intense with weight bearing and muscle activity spreading up to the lower leg.
2. A superficial burning, stinging pain in the foot soles, often accompanied by sensory disturbance. Both can seriously affect daily activities (9).

Closed compartment syndrome is the most severe complication of falanga. It can lead to necrosis (irreversible muscle damage) due to vascular obstruction (blockage of a blood vessel). This can further develop into gangrene (a serious bacterial infection) of the distal portion of the foot or toes potentially leading to amputation (10).

Crushed heel and footpads which lead to loss of the cushioning effect and loss of the feet’s ability to absorb the stresses produced by walking (10).

Rupture of the plantar aponeurosis which is the connective tissue located beneath the skin of the soles of the feet (10).

Plantar fasciitis, i.e. inflammation of tissue that runs across the bottom of the foot, may occur as a future complication of falanga (10).

CONCLUSION

Falanga is practiced in many countries and has serious health consequences. Currently there is a dearth of treatment protocols for falanga survivors derived from a systematic study of treatment and outcome of treatment.

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