
KNIFE WOUND

Knives are found in every culture, and in lots of people's backs. We're going to take a stab at explaining how these pieces of metal can cut the life out of you.

HOW IT KILLS

Knives are pieces of metal that have been shaped and sharpened into a blade. Many knives are designed as weapons, but unless you're the target of an assassin, you're most likely facing someone who's using the nearest readily available knife, and odds are that it will be a kitchen knife.

Knives come in a variety of lengths, but standard kitchen knives range from the 4.5-inch blade of a steak knife to the eight-inch blade of a knife used for cutting meat or chopping vegetables. Given the flimsy construction of most steak knives—the blades are apt to snap if thrust against bone—we'll focus on the long knives.

Your assailant is likely to attack by aiming for your chest or neck, which are natural targets for someone holding a blade aloft and thrusting it downward (long knives are



deadliest when thrust with the force from your elbow). You will bleed immediately from any contact between the blade and your skin, which will be a slash or a puncture that cuts open capillaries and other blood vessels. While a single stab wound is unlikely to kill you, repeated stabbings will. The slicing of both veins and arteries will result in heavy blood loss, which may be enough to kill you.

You will also incur what are called “defensive wounds” as you ward off the attack with your hands and arms. This will increase blood loss, leading to shock, not to mention a great deal of pain.

The puncturing of a vital organ—stomach, intestines, liver, kidney, and even heart—can cause organ failure. Thanks to its length, a long knife can be driven most of the way through the chest cavity or abdomen when pushed in “up to the hilt,” as it were. Yet this can only occur if the attacker attacks using an awkward grip that allows stabbing forward, upward, or from the side. Unless you’re incapacitated, these stab wounds are likely to be the exception rather than the norm.

KNOWN BY SCIENCE AS:

Puncture wound

MEDICAL CAUSE OF DEATH

Organ failure; blood loss; shock

TIME TO KILL

Variable. It ranges from a few minutes to an hour or so. If you survive the initial assault, you might just be okay.

HIGHEST RISK

Relatives, ex-girl- or boyfriends, jealous lovers, sentries on night patrol, drunken bar brawlers, neighbors of knife-wielding maniacs.

LETHALITY

Low. Stab wounds to most of the body, notably the extremities and even the face and head, will not result in death. The rib cage prevents direct assault on the most vulnerable organs, so the attacker has to be skilled enough, or lucky enough, to strike unprotected organs (liver, stomach, kidney, intestines) or sever major blood vessels.

KILLS PER ANNUM

Between 1,500 and 2,000 every year in the United States alone, with an estimated 20,000 more worldwide.

HISTORIC DEATH TOLL

Millions. People have been stabbing each other to death from the moment they could sharpen a bit of stone or piece of metal.

NOTABLE VICTIM

Julius Caesar was stabbed on March 15, 44 BC by members of the Roman senate. The assassins stabbed Caesar nearly two dozen times before he died. He uttered his famous last words to his best friend Brutus, who was an accomplice in the murder: “Et tu, Brute?” (You too, Brutus?). That day, Brutus became the quintessential “backstabber.”

HORROR FACTOR: 8

Getting stabbed once is bad, but it really takes a prolonged attack to kill you. The prolonged aspect is increasingly painful and the attendant blood spattering will freak out anyone.

GRIM FACTS

- Stabbing yourself to death with a knife in a ritual suicide in Japan is called *seppuku* (commonly referred to as *hara-kiri*).

- Stabbing is the most common form of murder in Britain, accounting for nearly a third of all homicides (guns are outlawed in Britain, but are still used in roughly 10 percent of all murders). Stabbing accounts for 13 percent of U.S. murders.
- If the knife is left sticking in your body after a single stab, there may not be much blood. But just because you're not bleeding on the outside does not mean that you're not gushing a lot on the inside.
- Other instruments used for stabbing—both intentional and accidental—include box cutter, razors, glass shards, nails, scissors, pens and pencils, drill bits, and metal spikes.