



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Sexual Assault

Q: What is sexual assault?

A: Sexual assault is any type of sexual activity that you do not agree to, including:

- Rape (forced vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse)
- Attempted rape
- Someone putting his or her finger, tongue, mouth, or an object in or on your vagina or anus
- Unwanted touching, fondling, grabbing, or kissing
- Someone forcing you to masturbate or to masturbate them
- Someone forcing you to look at sexual material or to pose for sexual pictures
- Someone exposing his or her sexual body parts to you in public
- A doctor, nurse, or other health care worker touching your sexual body parts in an improper manner

There are many ways that people can be involved in sexual activity against their will. They can be:

- Physically forced
- Threatened with force or a weapon
- Pressured by someone with power over them, such as a boss or teacher
- Under the influence of alcohol or drugs, possibly without knowing they have been drugged

As long as you do not agree to the sexual activity, it is sexual assault. It is not your fault and it doesn't matter:

- How you were dressed
- If were unconscious or asleep
- If you chose to drink or do drugs
- If you've had sex before with the person who assaulted you
- If you didn't fight back physically
- If you didn't say "no" because you were afraid of getting hurt
- If you agreed to kissing but not to anything else
- How sexually active you have been in the past

Q: Who commits sexual assaults?

A: When people think of sexual assault, they often think of a stranger jumping out of the shadows and attacking someone. But 3 out of 4 girls and women who are sexually assaulted know their attacker. An attacker may be a:

- Friend
- Acquaintance
- Coworker
- Date
- Spouse or partner
- Family member

Q: How can sexual assault affect me emotionally?

A: After a sexual assault, people can react in different ways. There is no one pattern of response. Some show emotional effects right after the assault. Others may have delayed reactions. Some appear to recover quickly. Others are affected by the assault for a long time.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

In the early stages, assault victims may feel shocked, confused, anxious, or numb. Some may not fully admit to themselves what has happened to them. Or they may pretend that "everything is fine" or "it could have been worse." This denial may be more common among people who are assaulted by someone they know.

Other reactions that can occur after a sexual assault include:

- **Depression.** Research suggests that almost one-third of female rape victims have at least one period of depression during their lives. Depression involves feelings of sadness or other symptoms lasting more than two weeks. Symptoms of depression include:
 - Crying spells
 - Being unable to enjoy things
 - Feeling helpless or hopeless
 - Loss of energy
 - Problems paying attention or making decisions
 - Suicidal thoughts or attempting suicide
 - **Shame and guilt.** Some people blame themselves for what happened or feel ashamed about being an assault victim. Shame and guilt are common among those who were assaulted by someone they know. These emotions are also common among assault victims who do not receive support from friends, family, or the police.
 - **Social problems.** Some assault victims are too anxious or depressed
- to want to socialize. Others report they have problems trusting others after the assault, so it is difficult to make new friends. Still others feel emotionally dead, with no interest in their family, friends, or jobs.
 - **Sexual problems.** Assault victims may be afraid of any sexual activity and try to avoid it. They may also feel less sexual desire.
 - **Smoking, alcohol abuse, and drug use.** Assault victims are more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol, and use drugs. Many say that they use these substances to control their emotional problems caused by the assault.
 - **Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.** This disorder involves a pattern of symptoms that some people develop after a trauma, such as sexual assault. Symptoms include:
 - *Reliving the trauma.* Assault victims may be unable to stop remembering the assault. Many have nightmares about it. Some have flashbacks, which means they feel like they are going through the event again.
 - *Avoidance behaviors.* Assault victims may avoid thoughts, feelings, or situations that remind them of the assault.
 - *Being "on edge."* Assault victims may startle easily and be alert to every sight and sound around them. Many have trouble falling or staying asleep. Assault victims may also feel and express intense anger.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Q: How can sexual assault affect me physically?

A: Sexual assault can cause physical injuries, such as tears in the vagina. Victims may also have injuries to other parts of the body, such as bruises, black eyes, and scratches.

After a rape, there is a risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including:

- Gonorrhea
- Chlamydia
- Syphilis
- Hepatitis B and C
- HIV

The stress of sexual assault can also cause physical problems, such as:

- Headaches
- Migraines
- Stomach problems
- Light headedness or dizziness
- Hot or cold flashes

Q: What should I do if I'm being sexually assaulted?

A: Every situation is different, and there are no easy answers. The first thing you can do is try to calm down and use your head. Below are some of your choices:

- If possible, try to escape. Look for open doors or windows.
- Make noise. Yell! Scream!
- Talk and stall for time.
- If your attacker has a weapon, do whatever it takes to stay alive.
- If your attacker tries to move you to another location, do whatever it

takes to stay where you are.

- If you decide to fight, be confident and prepared to follow through. Some attackers will give up. Others will become more violent.
- Remember that it's not your fault.

Q: I have been sexually assaulted. What should I do?

- A:**
- Get to a safe place away from your attacker. Do not touch or change anything in the place where you were assaulted.
 - If you have been the victim of any type of sexual assault, go straight to your nearest hospital emergency room. At the hospital, staff will provide medical care and collect evidence. To help the staff collect evidence, before you go, **DO NOT:**
 - Shower, wash, or douche
 - Brush or comb your hair
 - Brush your teeth or gargle
 - Clean your nails
 - Use the restroom
 - Put on makeup
 - Change your clothes
 - Eat or drink anything

Bring along a change of clothes because the clothes you are wearing may be kept for evidence.

At the hospital, doctors and nurses will collect evidence, such as semen, hairs, clothing fibers, and saliva. If you think that you have been drugged, ask the staff to collect a urine sample. At the hospital, you can call 911 to report the crime to the police or the hospital staff can do that for you.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Besides collecting evidence, hospital staff will treat any injuries you may have, including internal injuries. They will also test for and treat any STIs that you may have gotten from the attack. Since it may not be possible to detect an STI right after an attack, you may need to return to see your doctor within a week or two for more tests. If there is a possibility of syphilis or HIV infection, you may need to be tested several times for up to 6 months after the assault.

If there is a possibility that you have gotten pregnant from the attack, you will be offered emergency contraception at the hospital.

- Call a friend or family member you trust. You can also call a local sexual assault crisis center and ask for an advocate. To find the number of a center in your area, look in your phone book or call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673). You can also find a list of centers at <http://www.womenshealth.gov/violence/state/>. The advocate can do a number of things for you, including:
 - Go with you to the hospital and police station
 - Tell you how to report the crime and what the police are likely to ask you
 - Give you and your loved ones counseling
 - Tell you how to find mental health specialists, shelters, support groups, and other services
 - Help you with the legal system and go with you to court

- To help the police catch and convict your attacker, write down everything you can remember about the assault as soon as you can. Things to write down include:
 - What your attacker looked like (including height, weight, scars, tattoos, hair color, clothes)
 - Any special traits of your attacker (including a limp, speech problems, use of slang)
 - What kinds of sexual acts were demanded or carried out during the assault
 - Anything the attacker said during the assault
 - What kinds of weapons, threats, or physical force were used
 - Whether the attacker appeared to have been drinking or taking drugs

Many sexual assault survivors do not report their assault to the police. Reasons include:

- Shame and embarrassment
- Self-blame
- Fear of being attacked again
- Fear of the legal system

Keep in mind, though, that reporting your assault to the police may prevent your attacker from hurting someone else. Also, reporting means you may be able to get crime victim compensation funds. These funds can help pay for:

- Medical expenses, including the costs involved in collecting evidence
- Mental health counseling and other treatment



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

- Lost wages
- Other services

Q: How can I help someone who has been sexually assaulted?

A: Take the victim to an emergency room or call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673) to find a local sexual assault crisis center.

You can also:

- Listen. Offer comfort. Don't be judgmental.
- Go with her or him to the police or to counseling.
- Let the person know that the assault was not her or his fault.
- Let the person know that she or he did what was needed to prevent more harm.
- Be patient. Remember, it will take some time for the person to deal with the crime.

Q: What should I do if my daughter has been sexually assaulted?

A: Take your daughter to an emergency room with staff trained in dealing with child and teen sexual assault victims. To find the best place to take your daughter, ask your family doctor or local sexual assault crisis center. To find the number of your local sexual assault crisis center, look in your phone book or call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800-656-HOPE (4673).

At the hospital, the staff will:

- Test for and treat possible STIs and physical injuries
- Offer emergency contraception if there is a chance that your daughter

may become pregnant from the assault

- Collect evidence to be used in court
- Refer your daughter to a mental health counselor, if she needs one

In the weeks and months after the assault, make sure that your daughter gets any follow-up care that she needs, such as more testing for STIs or pregnancy. Also, be alert for any mental health problems, such as depression or eating disorders. Above all, focus on her needs and don't blame yourself or your daughter for what has happened.

Q: How can I protect myself from being sexually assaulted?

A: There are things you can do to reduce your chances of being sexually assaulted:

Walking or jogging

- Be aware of your surroundings. Stay alert to where you are, who is around you, and what's going on. Trust your instincts. If you feel unsafe, leave.
- Walk with confidence. The more confident you look, the stronger you appear.
- Be assertive — don't let anyone get too close to you.
- Avoid walking or jogging alone, especially at night. Vary your route. Stay in well-traveled, well-lit areas.
- Know the "safe" places on your route. "Safe" places include police stations, hospitals, and open stores and restaurants. If you think you are being followed, go inside one of those places.
- Carry a small noisemaker, like a whistle.



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

- If you have a dog, take the dog with you. Even a small dog can make a lot of noise if you are attacked.
- Carry a cell phone, if you have one. Also, carry some change in case you need to use a pay phone.
- Carry cab money.
- Avoid carrying a lot of packages or bags. Being loaded down can make you look easier to assault.
- Whenever possible, wear clothes and shoes that you can run away in.
- When walking or jogging, don't use music headphones in both ears so that you can stay alert to your surroundings.
- Keep your distance when anyone in a car asks you for directions.

Driving

- Drive on well-traveled streets.
- Park in well-lit areas and lock your car, even if you'll only be gone a few minutes.
- Keep your car doors locked while driving and when parked in your own driveway or garage.
- Have your key ready to use before you reach the car door.
- Never pick up a hitchhiker.
- Keep your car in good shape.
- Have at least half a tank of gas at all times.
- In case of car trouble, call for help on your cell phone.
- If you don't have a phone, put the hood up, lock the doors, and keep a banner in your car that you can put in the rear mirror that says, "Help. Call police."

At home

- Watch your keys. Don't lend them. Don't leave them. Don't lose them. And don't put your name and address on the key ring.
- Have your key ready to use before you reach the front door.
- When at home, lock all entrances, including the front door, windows, and patio doors. When you leave, lock the door, even if it is only for a few minutes.
- Close your blinds or curtains at night.
- Watch out for unwanted visitors. Know who's on the other side of the door before you open it.
- Install an outside lighting system, with motion detectors.
- If you come home and see a door or window open, do not go in. Call the police right away.
- Know your neighbors so that you can call on them if you need help.
- Be wary of places without a lot of people, like underground garages and apartment laundry rooms.

At a party

- When you go to a party, go with a group of friends. Arrive together, check on each other during the party, and leave together. Don't leave with someone you just met or don't know well.
- Don't let drugs or alcohol cloud your judgment. Keep track of how many drinks you have.
- Be aware of rape drugs. They can make you unable to fight off a sexual assault and unable to remember it later. Don't accept drinks from



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

someone you don't know and trust. Always be in control of your drink. If you don't see it at all times, dump it. (See Date Rape Drugs)

On a date

- Be clear with the men in your life about what, if any, sexual behavior you are comfortable with.
- Check out a first date or blind date with friends. Meet in and go to public places. Drive your own car or take the subway or bus.
- Have a code word to use with your friends or family. If you don't feel

comfortable with the person you are with, you can call and use the code word so that your friend or family member can come get you.

Another good idea is to take a personal safety course. In this type of course, you learn self-defense and how to reduce your risk of being assaulted. These courses are often taught by police officers and usually include at least one female officer. Personal safety courses are offered at universities, community centers, and YMCAs. ■



womenshealth.gov

1-800-994-9662

TDD: 1-888-220-5446

For More Information . . .

For more information on sexual assault, please call womenshealth.gov at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

**Division of Violence Prevention,
NCIPC, CDC, HHS**

Phone number: (800) 232-4636

Internet Address: www.cdc.gov/ncipc/dvp/dvp.htm

**Office on Violence Against Women,
OJP, DOJ**

Phone number: (800) 799-7233

Internet Address: www.ovw.usdoj.gov/

National Center for Victims of Crime

Phone number: (800) 394-2255

Internet Address: www.ncvc.org

National Crime Prevention Council

Phone number: (202) 466-6272

Internet Address: [/www.ncpc.org](http://www.ncpc.org)

National Domestic Violence Hotline

Phone number: (800) 799-7233

Internet Address: www.ndvh.org

**National Sexual Violence Resource
Center**

Phone number: (877) 739-3895

Internet Address: www.nsvrc.org

**Rape, Abuse, and Incest National
Network**

Phone number: (202) 544-3064

Internet Address: www.rainn.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline

Phone number: (800) 656-4673

All material contained in the FAQs is free of copyright restrictions, and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services; citation of the sources is appreciated.

Content last updated September 1, 2008.