

Seeking Medical Care After Experiencing Violence

This page is focused on the details of medical care.

Q: I've just been sexually assaulted or raped. What should I do?

A: The first priority is your safety. Get to a safe place, whether it is your own home, a family member or friend's home, a neighbor's home, or a public area where you can call for help.

You should try to save anything that might contain the perpetrator's DNA, because investigators and medical professionals can collect this and use it to build a case against your assailant. Even if you don't think you want to file a police report, you might change your mind at a later date. Therefore, you should not:

- Bathe or shower
- Brush teeth, rinse mouth, etc.
- Use the restroom
- Change clothes
- Comb hair
- Clean up the crime scene
- Move anything the offender may have touched

Q: I'm not sure I want to go to a health care facility, such as a hospital or doctor's office. Why should I go?

A: It is very important to seek medical attention, regardless of whether or not you want to report the crime to the police. You should be checked and treated for possible injuries, even if none are visible. This includes testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), as well as receiving preventative treatments that may be available. For example, you may be able to receive medications that prevent STIs (including HIV) and pregnancy. Even if you are unsure about filing a police report, you should still receive medical attention.

Q: How can I find a health care facility in my area that is equipped to work with survivors of sexual violence?

A: In the United States, contact the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN) via their phone hotline (1.800.656.HOPE) or online hotline. The phone hotline automatically uses your area code to put you in touch with your local rape crisis center, while trained employees/volunteers on the online hotline can help you locate Rape Crisis Centers in your area. Alternatively, you can go to <http://centers.rainn.org> to search for a Rape Crisis Center.

Q: Why contact a local Rape Crisis Center? Why not just go to a hospital?

A: Your local Rape Crisis Center will know which hospitals or other health care facilities are best equipped to work with survivors of sexual violence. For example, some hospitals may have trained sexual assault nurse examiners (SANEs). SANEs are exceptional not only for the medical care they provide, but they are also trained to collect forensic evidence, which is vital if you want to proceed with a criminal investigation. Sadly, not all hospitals have SANE programs, so it's good to check in with your local Rape Crisis Center and see which facilities are best in your area.

In addition, many Rape Crisis Centers are able to send a trained advocate to accompany you to the hospital. This person will provide emotional support, as well as answer any questions you may have and connect you with further local resources such as counseling.

Finally, you may have questions regarding whether or not you can receive medical attention without undergoing a forensic evidence collection, whether or not the police will be called, whether or not you must file a police report, etc. The best resource to answer these questions is your local Rape Crisis Center, because the laws and procedures vary by state. A Rape Crisis Center will be able to provide you with information about the specific policies and procedures in your area.

Q: What else can a Rape Crisis Center provide?

A: According to RAINN’s website, Rape Crises Centers have a wide range of services, or can refer to other local services, for the following:

- Individual counseling
- Group counseling/support groups
- Legal/criminal justice system advocacy
- Crime victim assistance advocacy
- Casework/practical assistance
- Emergency shelter
- Hospital Accompaniment

Q: I’ve heard about something called a “rape kit.” What is this?

A: You may have heard the term “rape kit” to refer to a sexual assault forensic exam. The term rape kit actually refers to the kit itself—a container that includes a checklist, materials, and instructions, along with envelopes and containers to package any specimens collected during the exam. A rape kit may also be referred to as a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK). The contents of the kit vary by state and jurisdiction and may include:

- Bags and paper sheets for evidence collection
- Comb
- Documentation forms
- Envelopes
- Instructions
- Materials for blood samples
- Swabs

For more information about this, please see this article from RAINN at <https://www.rainn.org/articles/rape-kit>

Q: Is there anything that can be done at the hospital to make this process a little easier?

A: Some suggestions include having a rape crisis advocate present for emotional support, asking the physician or nurse to let you know what they are doing BEFORE they do it so you are not startled, and asking to take a break from the exam if you need one.

Q: What can I expect in the future concerning medical care?

A: You may be asked to follow up with a clinic or doctor's office for continuing treatment of any injuries you sustained, further STI testing, pregnancy testing, etc. If you do not have access to a doctor's office, the RCC may be able to give you a referral. Alternatively, you can utilize free or reduced cost clinics, such as Planned Parenthood.

It is strongly suggested that you inform any future health care providers of your sexual assault, even if you are seeing them for an unrelated reason. This allows you the opportunity to discuss with them what you need during a physical exam, such as proceeding slowly, asking them to let you know what they are doing BEFORE they do it so you are not startled, and asking to take a break from the exam if you need one. You can also discuss any particular procedures that trigger memories of your assault.

Finally, there are many documented long-term effects of sexual assault, including physical problems such as headaches or stomach pain, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, eating disorders, etc. Something that you think is a random symptom or illness may actually be an after effect of your assault, so it is important that the physician knows your history so (s)he can make this connection. If you start experiencing a new symptom, it is acceptable and encouraged to remind your physician that you are an assault survivor so that (s)he does not overlook a possible correlation between your assault and the new symptom.