

Sexual Assault

What Is It?

Sexual assault is forcing another person into sexual acts. Sexual assault may involve touching, fondling, contact between the mouth and either the victim's or the abuser's private parts (genital area), and putting body parts or other objects inside the victim's body. Sexual assault is an act that is done to the victim or that the victim is forced to do with someone else. Sexual assault can also be called rape, acquaintance rape, date rape, marital rape, sexual abuse, or incest. Victims may be male or female. Every state has laws against sexual assault.

Who Commits Sexual Assault?

Some perpetrators of sexual assault (those who commit the crime) are strangers. However, most victims are sexually assaulted by someone they know—family members, friends, romantic partners, acquaintances, or dates.

How Does a Rapist Control a Victim?

Rapists don't always use physical force or weapons to commit the crime. They may threaten to hurt victims or someone they care about if the victims do not cooperate. They may isolate them (take them to a place where there are no other people who might help). They may intimidate them by threatening to spread rumors about the victims or cause other problems for them. Rapists often use alcohol or drugs to incapacitate victims so they can't protect themselves. Sometimes two or more perpetrators drug victims without their knowledge to commit sexual assault.

Important Facts about Sexual Assault

Many harmful myths surround the subject of sexual assault, causing great damage to victims. Some important facts for victims to understand about sexual assault are that:

- **Sexual assault is a violent crime.** Research shows that those who commit sexual assault seek to dominate and humiliate their victims rather than to find sexual satisfaction. Most perpetrators are either married or have regular sexual partners.¹
- **The perpetrator is responsible.** Perpetrators often blame the victim for the sexual assault. They may say that they assaulted the victim because he or she dressed in a certain way or flirted with the perpetrator or others. But in fact, the perpetrator chose to force sexual activity on another person against his or her will.
- **Rape can occur within an intimate relationship.** Even in marriage or an intimate relationship, anytime one partner forces the other to have sex against that person's will, rape has occurred.

¹ Lawrence Greenfield, "Sex Offenses and Offenders: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault," (Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, 1997).

How Does Sexual Assault Affect Victims?

Victims may react to sexual assault in different ways. They may not tell anyone about what happened. They may be anxious, ashamed, and afraid of what people might think. They may blame themselves for “allowing” the assault to happen. They may think the police will doubt their accounts of the crime or not take it seriously.

If You Are a Victim

How You May Feel: You may feel shock, numbness, lack of control, helplessness, or vulnerability. You may be overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, and you may not want to see your friends and family. You may cry, yell, and shake, or you may feel calm and unaffected. You may have flashbacks and nightmares, changes in eating patterns (eating too much or very little), and you may be unable to concentrate. Or you may not have any of these responses. There is no “typical” reaction to sexual assault.

Common Injuries: You may have bruises, cuts, and soreness in your genital area or any part of your body that the person who assaulted you had contact with. You may feel nauseated and numb. Or you may have no physical injuries, as far as you can tell. However, you may have been exposed to sexually transmitted diseases that might surface when symptoms appear later on.

Decisions to Consider:

- **Medical Care:** Will you seek medical care to treat your injuries and be tested for sexually transmitted diseases or pregnancy? You may want to seek such help, even if you decide not to report the crime.
- **Counseling:** Will you cope with your feelings privately or seek the help of a trained professional? Counseling can help you manage the emotional and physical impact of the crime and regain a sense of control over your life.
- **Reporting the Crime:** Will you report the crime? If you decide to file a report, timing is important. The sooner police know about a sexual assault, the more quickly physical evidence can be found. If the police request a forensic exam (sometimes called a “rape kit”), the exam should be done as soon as possible to collect any physical evidence.

Resources

The best way to find out about these options is to talk to a crime victim advocate. The National Crime Victim Helpline (1-800-FYI-CALL) advocates can help you think through these decisions and refer you to resources in your area. Helpline services are free and confidential.

National Crime Victim Helpline

1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255)

1-800-211-7996 TTY

8:30 a.m.– 8:30 p.m. ET weekdays

Or visit: **Help for Crime Victims:** www.ncvc.org/victimassistance

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