

Sexual Assault

What Is It?

For sexual activity to be all right, it must be consensual, which means that both people want it to happen. Sexual assault is when any person forces you to participate in a sexual act when you don't want to. This can include touching or penetrating the vagina, mouth, or anus of the victim (often called rape); touching the penis of the victim; or forcing the victim to touch the attacker's vagina, penis, or anus. Touching can mean with a hand, finger, mouth, penis, or just about anything else, including objects.

It doesn't always take physical force to sexually assault a victim. Attackers can use threats or intimidation to make a victim feel afraid or unable to refuse them. It is also sexual assault if the victim is drunk, drugged, unconscious, or too young (ages of consent differ from state to state) or mentally disabled to be legally able to agree to sexual contact.

Most victims are assaulted by someone they know: a friend, date, acquaintance, or boyfriend or girlfriend. Dating or being sexually involved with someone does not give that person the right to force you to have sexual contact you don't want. Even if you have had sex before, you have the right to say "NO" at any time. You are also allowed to change your mind at any time. Being sexually assaulted is never your fault.

Most perpetrators of sexual assault are male, whether the victim is female or male. Victims can be males or females of any age, race, social class, appearance, or sexual orientation. The majority of sexual assault victims are women and girls, but many men and boys are sexually assaulted, too.

Sometimes people will use manipulation to get someone to give into sex. They might say things such as "If you really loved me, you'd do it" or "I'm going to tell everyone we did it anyway, so you might as well." This kind of behavior can be hurtful, although it often doesn't meet the legal definition of sexual assault, and is a sign of a controlling or emotionally abusive partner. The same is true of a partner who won't (or won't let you) use birth control

when you want to. People who experience this kind of behavior can have similar reactions to people who have been sexually assaulted. If this is happening to you, consider seeking help.

If You Are a Victim of Sexual Assault, You Might:

- Feel afraid, ashamed, angry, sad, lonely, betrayed, or depressed.
- Feel guilty and confused if you knew or had a relationship with the attacker, even though the assault was not your fault.
- Feel like you have no friends or that your friends won't believe you.
- Want to hurt someone else or yourself.
- Feel like taking steps to defend yourself.
- Feel helpless to stop the assault.
- Feel hopeless about whether anything can be done.
- Be afraid to go anywhere that the attacker might be.
- Feel anxious all the time.
- Feel bad about yourself or your body.

You're Not Alone

- Sexual assault is a widespread and underreported crime.
- In 2005, law enforcement received 69,370 reports of rapes.¹
- In 2005, more than 170,000 women and 15,000 men were victims of attempted or completed rapes.²
- More teens are raped by people they know than they are by strangers.³

Get Help

Being a victim of sexual assault is not your fault. Nothing in what you say, the way you look, where you are, or who you are with gives anyone else the right to hurt you. It does not matter if you are dating or have ever been intimate with the person who sexually assaulted you; it does not give that person the right to force you to participate in sexual acts if you don't want to, even if you have had sexual activity of any sort with them in the past. It's still wrong.

- Seek immediate medical attention, preferably at an emergency room. Medical personnel are trained to perform a "rape kit" exam, where they are able to gather evidence while examining the victim to help police and prosecutors find and charge the perpetrator. If you might ever want to report the assault, it is important that you do not shower, change clothes, or clean up in any way before going to the hospital, in order not to disturb any evidence medical staff might be able to collect for the police. Sometimes this process can be easier if you have a trusted friend, adult, or victim advocate with you.

- Even if you don't want to report the assault to police right now, it is still important to have a medical exam to make sure you are all right. Sometimes people change their minds and want to report to the police later. Also, in addition to treating injuries, medical personnel can test for pregnancy and whether or not you may have been drugged. They can also give you drugs to reduce your chances of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) or getting pregnant.
- Tell a trusted friend or adult. See if someone can go with you to get medical treatment.
- Call a local victim service provider, such as a rape crisis center. You may be able to find a number to call in your local phone book. If you cannot find one, call the National Crime Victim Helpline at 1-800-FYI-CALL (1-800-394-2255) or the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 1-800-656-HOPE. If you want to report the assault, call the police.
- If you choose to tell, you should know that some adults are mandated reporters. This means they are legally required to report neglect or abuse to someone else, such as the police or child protective services. You can ask people if they are mandated reporters and then decide what you want to do. Some examples of mandated reporters are teachers, counselors, doctors, social workers, and in some cases, coaches or activity leaders.
- If you want help deciding whom to talk to, call our National Crime Victim Helpline at 1-800-FYI-CALL, or an anonymous crisis line in your area. You might also want to talk to a trusted family member, a friend's parent, an adult neighbor or friend, an older sibling or cousin, or another experienced person who you trust.

Help Yourself

- Try to avoid being alone, especially with your attacker, and be alert to your surroundings.
- Think about getting help making a safety plan to avoid or escape a dangerous situation, especially if you know your attacker.
- Make sure you have a safe place to stay.
- Think about talking to a rape crisis center or other victim assistance counselor about what happened to you, so they can help you find a safe place to stay, give you counseling, and help you understand your options, such as what medical staff will do during a "rape kit" exam or what might happen while going through the criminal justice system.

Help Someone Else

If you know someone who has been the victim of sexual assault, you can help.

- If your friend tells you that she or he has been assaulted, remember that it is not your friend's fault. Help him or her get to a safe place. Listen patiently and without judgment. Offer your support and encouragement in getting help.
- Talk to your friend and try to get him or her to also talk to an adult and get medical attention. Offer to go with the person. If your friend is badly injured, call 911. Encourage your friend to have a rape kit exam whether or not he or she intends to report the crime to police. Your friend can always make the decision about whether or not to report the crime later.
- Report the assault to an adult you trust.

If You Want to Read More...

- about male rape, or
- about child sexual abuse,

...see our GET HELP series at www.ncvc.org/gethelp.

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- 1 Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States, 2005*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006).
 - 2 Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 2005: Statistical Tables*, (Washington, DC: GPO, 2006), Table 2.
 - 3 *Ibid.*, Table 29.