



A safe, private place to get doctor-approved information on health, emotions, and life.

## Rape

Rape, sometimes also called sexual assault, can happen to both men and women of any age. The U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines rape as: "The penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim."

Rape is forced and unwanted. It's about power, not sex. A rapist uses actual force or violence — or the threat of it — to take control over another human being. Some rapists use drugs to take away a person's ability to fight back. Rape is a crime, whether the person committing it is a stranger, a date, an acquaintance, or a family member.

No matter how it happened, rape is upsetting. People who have been raped need care, comfort, and a way to heal.

### What Should I Do?

What's the right thing to do if you've been raped? Take care of yourself in the best way **for you**. For some people, that means reporting the crime immediately and fighting to see the rapist brought to justice. For others it means seeking medical or emotional care without reporting the rape as a crime. Every person is different.

There are three things that everyone who has been raped should do, though:

1. Know that the rape wasn't your fault.
2. Seek medical care.
3. Deal with your feelings.

### It's Not Your Fault

Whatever happened, it wasn't your fault. **No one** has the right to have sex with you against your will. The blame for a rape lies solely with the rapist.

Sometimes a rapist will try to exert even more power by making the person who's been raped feel like it was actually his or her fault. A rapist may say stuff like, "You asked for it" or "You wanted it." This is just another way for the rapist to take control. The truth is that what a person wears, what a person says, or how a person acts is *never* a justification for rape.

Most people who are raped know their rapists. That can sometimes lead the person who's been raped to try to protect the perpetrator. *Make protecting yourself your priority*. Don't worry about protecting the person who raped you.

If you want to report the crime to the police, do so. Reporting a rape may help protect others from that person — and may help you feel a little less like you were a victim.

But making a report to the police may be difficult for some people. If you don't feel comfortable reporting it, you don't have to. You may prefer to get advice about what to do from an experienced adult who can be sympathetic to you. Do whatever helps you to feel safe and heal without blaming yourself.

### Seek Medical Care

The first thing someone who has been raped needs to do is see a medical doctor. Most medical centers and hospital emergency departments have doctors and counselors who have been trained to take care of someone who has been raped. It's important to get medical care because a doctor will need to check you for sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and internal injuries.

Most areas have local rape hotlines that can give you advice about where to go for medical help. You may want to have a friend or family member go along for support, especially if you're feeling upset and unsafe. Some rape crisis centers also provide advocates who can go along with you. You can also call the national sexual assault hotline at (800) 656-HOPE.

If you are under 18 and don't want your parents to know about the rape, ask the rape crisis center about the laws in your area. Many jurisdictions treat rape exams confidentially, but some will require that a parent or guardian be notified.

You should get medical attention right away **without** changing your clothes, showering, douching, or washing. It can be hard not to clean up, of course — it's a natural human instinct to wash away all traces of a sexual assault. But being examined right away is the best way to ensure you get proper medical treatment.

Immediate medical attention also helps when people decide to report the crime, providing evidence needed to prosecute the rapist if a criminal case is pursued. If you've been raped and think you don't want to report it, you could change your mind later — this often happens — and having the results of a medical exam can help you do this. (There are laws, known as statutes of limitations, that give a person only a certain amount of time to pursue legal action for a crime, though, so be sure you know how long you have to report the rape. A local rape crisis center can advise you of the laws in your area.)

Even if you don't get examined right away, it doesn't mean you can't get a checkup later. It's always best to see a doctor immediately after a rape, of course. But a person can still go to a doctor or local clinic to get checked out for STDs, pregnancy, or injuries any time after being raped. In some cases, doctors can even gather evidence several days after a rape has occurred.

## What Happens During the Medical Exam?

When you go to the hospital after a rape, a trained counselor or social worker will listen while you talk about what happened. Talking to a trained listener can help you begin to release some of the emotions you are probably feeling so that you can start to feel calm and safe again.

The counselor may also talk with you about the medical exam and what it involves. Each state or jurisdiction has different requirements, of course, but here are some of the things that may happen during the medical exam:

- A medical professional will test you for STDs, including HIV/AIDS. These tests may involve taking blood or saliva samples. Although the thought of getting an STD after a rape is extremely scary, the quicker a person finds out about any infection, the more effectively he or she can be treated. Doctors can start you on immediate treatment courses for STDs, including HIV/AIDS, that will greatly increase your protection against developing these diseases.
- If you're female, a medical professional may treat you to prevent an unwanted pregnancy, if you wish.
- A medical professional will examine you internally to check for any injury that might have been caused by the rape.
- A medical professional or trained technician may look for and take samples of the rapist's hair, skin, nails, or bodily fluids from your clothes or body.
- If you think you've been given a rape drug, a doctor or technician can test for this, too. Be aware that this **toxicology test** covers any and all illegal drugs.

At any time during the medical exam, you can say if you don't want a certain test performed or evidence collected. All procedures are being done to help *you*, so you have control over which procedures you'd like done, as well as a say in any you *don't* want.

## Dealing With Feelings

Rape isn't just physically damaging, it can be emotionally traumatic as well. The right emotional attention, care, and support can help a person begin the healing process and prevent lingering problems later on.

Someone who has been raped might feel a lot of things: angry, degraded, frightened, numb, or confused. It's also normal for someone who has been raped to feel ashamed or embarrassed. Some people withdraw from friends and family. Others don't want to be alone. Some feel depressed, anxious, or nervous.

Sometimes the feelings surrounding rape may show up in physical ways, such as trouble sleeping or eating. It may be hard to concentrate in school or to participate in everyday activities. Sometimes it may feel like you'll never get over the trauma of the rape. Experts often refer to these emotions — and their physical side effects — as **rape trauma syndrome**. The best way to work through them is with professional help.

It can be hard to think or talk about a frightening experience, especially something as personal as rape. People who have been raped sometimes avoid seeking help because they're afraid that talking about it will bring back memories or feelings that are too painful. But this can actually do more harm than good.

Talking about rape in a safe environment with the help and support of a trained professional is the best way to ensure long-term healing. Working through the pain sooner rather than later can help reduce symptoms like nightmares and flashbacks. It can also help people avoid potentially harmful behaviors and emotions, like major depression or self-injury.

Every rape survivor works through his or her feelings differently. Some people feel most comfortable talking one-on-one with a therapist. Others find that joining a support group where they can be with other survivors helps them to feel better, get their power back, and move on with their lives. In a support group, you can get help and support as well as give it. Your experiences and ideas may help others heal.

**Reviewed by:** D'Arcy Lyness, PhD

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