

After sexual assault, it's hard to know how to react. You may be physically hurt, emotionally drained, or unsure what to do next. You may be considering working with the criminal justice system, but are unsure of where to start. Learning more about what steps you can take following sexual violence can help ground you in a difficult time.

## Steps You Can Take After Sexual Assault

It's hard to know what to do, how to feel, or what your options are after a sexual assault. Please know that you're not alone. Below are some things to keep in mind. If you are in immediate danger or seriously injured, call 911.

1. **Your safety is important.** Are you in a safe place? If you're not feeling safe, consider reaching out to someone you trust for support. You don't have to go through this alone.
2. **What happened was not your fault.** Something happened to you that you didn't want to happen—and that's not OK.
3. **Call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673).** You'll be connected to a trained staff member from a [local sexual assault service provider](#) in your area. They will direct you to the appropriate local health facility that can care for survivors of sexual assault. Some service providers may be able to send a trained advocate to accompany you.

When you call the National Sexual Assault Hotline, a staff member will walk you through the process of getting help at your own pace. You can also visit [online.rainn.org](https://online.rainn.org) to chat anonymously. Support specialists can also provide information on topics you might have questions about, including:

- Receiving medical attention
- Rape Kit
- Reporting

## Receiving Medical Attention

After a sexual assault, you may wish to seek medical attention to treat any possible injuries and to check for injuries you may not be able to see.

**How do I find medical care?**

Once you're in a safe place, you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4653) to be connected with a local sexual assault service provider. They will direct you to the appropriate local health facility that can care for survivors of sexual assault. They can also send an advocate to help walk you through the process of receiving medical care during this tough time. If you can, it's best to avoid showering or bathing before arrival. Bring a change of clothing with you if you are able.

In addition to receiving medical attention, you may wish to have a [sexual assault forensic exam](#), sometimes called a "rape kit." During this exam, someone specially trained to perform this exam, such as Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE), will collect DNA evidence that can help identify the perpetrator. You do not have to agree to a forensic exam to receive treatment, but doing so may give you a stronger case against the perpetrator if you decide to report the crime now or down the road.

## **What do I need to know about STIs?**

There may be a risk of contracting a [sexually transmitted infection](#) (STI) during a sexual assault. The only way to know for sure if you have an STI is to get tested. Based on what happened, a healthcare professional will recommend which tests are important to have now and which may need to be repeated in the future.

In some cases, a [Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner](#) (SANE) may suggest you do not get tested. Despite rape shield laws, there may be a concern that positive test results could be used against patients to suggest sexual promiscuity, according to the Department of Justice.<sup>1</sup>

You may also be offered prophylactic treatment, medication that is designed to ward off STIs before they take hold in your body. Some of these medicines have very strong side effects, especially medicines designed to prevent HIV. The healthcare professional should tell you what to expect and help you make an informed decision about these medications. If you have questions about what to expect or need clarification on how to take the medicine, you should feel comfortable asking.

## **What do I need to know about pregnancy?**

Often survivors have questions about pregnancy. These questions are best answered by healthcare professionals who can discuss the survivor's physical health. To learn more about medical health issues related to pregnancy visit the [National Institutes of Health](#).

### **How much will it cost?**

Like all healthcare, there may be some costs associated with medical attention and medication, but these costs shouldn't keep you from getting the care you need. There are victim compensation programs that can help cover some of the expenses. Most [victim compensations funds](#) require you to report the crime to law enforcement within 72 hours in order to be eligible.

## **What Is a Rape Kit?**

DNA evidence from a crime like sexual assault can be collected from the crime scene, but it can also be collected from your body, clothes, and other personal belongings. You may choose to have a sexual assault forensic exam, sometimes known as a "rape kit," to preserve possible DNA evidence and receive important medical care. You don't have to report the crime to have an exam, but the process gives you the chance to safely store evidence should you decide to report at a later time.

To find a location near you that performs sexual assault forensic exams, call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or talk to your [local sexual assault service provider](#).

### **What is a rape kit?**

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

## Preparing for a sexual assault forensic exam

If you are able to, try to avoid activities that could potentially damage evidence such as:

- Bathing
- Showering
- Using the restroom
- Changing clothes
- Combing hair
- Cleaning up the area

It's natural to want to go through these motions after a traumatic experience. If you have done any of these activities, you can still have an exam performed. You may want to bring a spare change of clothes with you to the hospital or health facility where you're going to have the exam.

In most cases, DNA evidence needs to be collected within 72 hours in order to be analyzed by a crime lab—but a sexual assault forensic exam can reveal other forms of evidence beyond this time frame that can be useful if you decide to report. Place your belongings, including the clothes you were wearing, in a **paper bag** to safely preserve evidence. If you have questions about the timeframe, you can call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) or talk to your [local sexual assault service provider](#).

## How long is the exam?

The length of the exam may take a few hours, but the actual time will vary based on several different factors. It may be helpful to have someone to support you during this time. If you call the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800.656.HOPE) or contact a [local sexual assault service provider](#), you may be connected with an advocate who can talk to you about the examination and offer support. The advocate may also be able to accompany you during the actual exam.

Be aware that if you invite someone other than an advocate into the exam room, they could be called as a witness if you decide to report the crime.

## What happens during a sexual assault forensic exam?

The steps below outline the general process for the exam. Remember, **you can stop, pause, or skip a step** at any time during the exam. It is entirely your choice.

- **Immediate care.** If you have injuries that need immediate attention, those will be taken care of first.
- **History.** You will be asked about your current medications, pre-existing conditions, and other questions pertaining to your health history. Some of the questions, such as those about recent consensual sexual activity, may seem very personal, but these questions are designed to ensure that DNA and other evidence collected from the exam can be connected to the perpetrator. You will also be asked about the details of what has happened to you to help identify all potential areas of injury as well as places on your body or clothes where evidence may be located.
- **Head-to-toe examination.** This part of the exam may be based on your specific experience, which is why it is important to give an accurate history. It may include a full body examination, including internal examinations of the mouth, vagina, and/or anus. It may also include taking samples of blood, urine, swabs of body surface areas, and sometimes hair samples. The trained professional performing the exam may take pictures of your body to document injuries and the examination. With your permission, they may also collect items of clothing, including undergarments. Any other forms of physical evidence that are identified during the examination may be collected and packaged for analysis, such as a torn piece of the perpetrator's clothing, a stray hair, or debris.
- **Possible mandatory reporting.** If you are a minor, the person performing the exam may be obligated to report it to law enforcement. You can learn more about mandatory reporting laws in your state through RAINN's [State Law Database](#).

- **Follow up care.** You may be offered prevention treatment for [STIs](#) and other forms of medical care that require a follow up appointment with a medical professional. Depending on the circumstances and where you live, the exam site may schedule a follow up appointment, or you can ask about resources in your community that offer follow up care for survivors of sexual assault. Someone from the exam site may also be able to provide information or resources about [reporting options](#).

## Who can perform the exam?

Not every hospital or health facility has someone on staff that is specially trained to perform a sexual assault forensic exam and interact with recent survivors of sexual assault. When you call the National Sexual Assault Hotline at 800.656.HOPE (4673) you will be directed to a facility that is prepared to give you the care you need.

- **Sexual Assault Nurse Examiners (SANEs)** — registered nurses who receive specialized education and fulfill clinical requirements to perform the exam
- **Sexual Assault Forensic Examiners (SAFEs) and Sexual Assault Examiners (SAEs)** — other healthcare professionals who have been instructed and trained to complete the exam

## Why should you consider having a sexual assault medical forensic exam?

- **It won't cost you.** You should not be charged for the exam. The [Violence Against Women Act](#) requires states to provide sexual assault forensic exams free of charge if they wish to remain eligible for critical anti-crime grant funding. If you are charged for the exam, immediately contact your [local sexual assault service provider](#).
- **You can have time to decide if you want to report.** The decision to report the crime is entirely yours. It may take some time to decide what to do. Having a sexual assault forensic exam ensures that the forensic evidence will be safely preserved if you decide to report at a later time.
- **It increases the likelihood of prosecution.** The [importance of DNA evidence](#) in sexual assault cases cannot be overstated. Not only does DNA

evidence carry weight in court, but it may prevent future sexual assaults from occurring. Even if the perpetrator is not prosecuted, their DNA may be added to the national database, making it easier to connect the perpetrator to a future crime.

- **Your health matters.** Sexual assault can affect your physical health. You may have injuries and trauma related to the assaults that aren't immediately visible. During an exam you may be able to access treatment for these injuries, receive preventative treatment for STIs, and obtain emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy.

### **How long will the evidence be stored?**

The amount of time an evidence kit will be stored varies by state and jurisdiction. A SANE, advocate, or law enforcement officer should let you know how long the evidence will be stored and the state's rules for disposing the kit. It's important to note that the amount of time the kit is stored doesn't necessarily match up with the amount of time that legal action can be taken against a perpetrator, also known as the [statute of limitation](#). If you have questions about timing, statutes of limitation, or any other concerns, contact your [local sexual assault service provider](#).