

Prevention Pathways

Online Courses

FACT SHEET

What to Do After a Rape or Sexual Assault

Women who take precautions can reduce the risk of assault. Sometimes, however, even the best precautions can't prevent a woman from being sexually assaulted or raped. In fact, by the time a woman reaches age 25, she has a one in four chance of being raped. Remember, rape is NEVER the victim's fault.

A woman who is raped should:¹

- **Go to a family or friend's house** or another safe place where she will not be alone.
- **Avoid showering, bathing, or douching.** It is also best if she doesn't drink, eat, smoke, or change clothes before seeing a health care worker or police officer. Physical samples will help identify the attacker or provide evidence if she decides to press charges later.
- **Go to a doctor as soon as possible** so wounds can be treated, pictures can be taken, and she can receive treatment for STDs and HIV as well as pregnancy prevention.
- **Get counseling as soon as possible.** The violence will probably make her afraid of being alone, afraid of men, and, perhaps, afraid of sex. To start, call the local rape crisis hotline.
- **Blame the rapist, not herself.** This is the most important thing to remember. The rape was not her fault. Her behavior did not cause it. Alcohol did not cause it—the rapist did. Alcohol cannot be used as a defense in court.

What should you do if a friend, relative, or coworker is raped and comes to you for help?

- **Allow her to decide whether she is ready to talk about what happened.** She may need more time.
- **Most important, believe her.** Be a good listener by:²
 - Just listening. Don't talk, give advice, or do anything. Just be quiet and hear her.
 - Do not ignore her feelings or tell her why she should not feel the way she does.
- Constant numbing of physical and emotional responses
- Denial of reality

- Accept her feelings—no matter how irrational or crazy they may seem to you.
- Don't do things for her that she can do for herself. She needs to regain her sense of control, not feel more helpless.
- If you need to talk, let her finish first.
- **Get advice from a rape crisis counselor** if you are not sure how best to help her. Any local phonebook will list crisis numbers and hotlines.
- **Read a book about surviving rape** so you can understand some of her emotions and feelings. Just being there for her is important.

Dealing With Traumatic Stress

Survivors of sexual assault often undergo "traumatic stress," which can trigger mental, physical, and emotional responses. These include fear, anger, pain, shock, and the shutdown of many physical systems. The effects of traumatic stress include:³

- Constant headaches
- Sleepiness or trouble sleeping
- Nausea
- Nightmares
- Decreased appetite
- Eating disorders
- Menstrual pain
- Suicide attempts

Sexual assault more than doubles the chances of substance abuse after the attack.⁴ A rape victim's trust and sense of personal safety have been destroyed. Besides losing the privacy of her body, she faces the chance of pregnancy, STDs, and HIV infection.

Many victims develop the lasting effects of traumatic stress, known as posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). First identified in war veterans, PTSD causes:⁵

- Guilt and self-blame
- Nightmares
- Bad memories that seem frighteningly real

Survivors of sexual assault may also be depressed, anxious, and quick to get angry. They may not be able to maintain relationships or cope with everyday problems.⁶ Some rape victims describe feeling dirty, cheap, and ashamed. In particular, some may feel:⁷

- **Shock and disbelief.** "I feel numb." "I can't believe this happened to me."
- **Constantly reminded of what happened and what it felt like.** "Sometimes, I can't stop thinking about it." "It comes back out of nowhere. I feel like it's happening all over again."

- **Intense emotions.** "I feel very sad, like I lost a part of me." "I have this intense anger that I never felt before."
- **Physical symptoms.** "I can't fall asleep at night."
- **Self-blame and shame.** "I feel like it was my fault. I trusted him."

For more information, go to www.samhsa.gov/preventionpathways and click on "courses" to find Module 8 of the online course, "It Won't Happen to Me: *Substance Abuse and Violence Against Women*." prevention@samhsa.gov.

References

¹ National Woman Abuse Prevention Project. (1997). *Helping the battered woman: a guide for family and friends*. Washington, DC: Author.

² Domestic Abuse Project Advocates and the Minnesota Coalition for Battered Women. (1999). *Safety first: Battered women surviving violence when alcohol and drugs are involved*. St. Paul, MN: Author.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1999). *Mental health: a report of the surgeon general* (Chpt 4). Rockville, MD: Author, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Center for Mental Health Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institutes of Mental Health.

⁴ National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. (2000). *Rape [Fact Sheet]*. Atlanta, GA: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education. (2001). *Sexual assault course* (Chpt 5: Types of sexual assault). Austin, TX: Author. Available at <http://www.utexas.edu/cee/dec/tcleose/assault/chapter5.html>.

⁷ Rape Treatment Center. (2001). *Impact of rape, campus rape, and acquaintance rape*. Santa Monica, CA: UCLA Medical Center. Available at www.911rape.org.

