

# What is Sexual Assault?

The term sexual assault is frequently used to describe sexual actions including rape, attempted rape, and other types of unwanted sexual touching and fondling. However, definitions of sexual assault and rape vary by state. Many times, "rape" and "sexual assault" are used interchangeably. The U.S. Justice Department has further clarified the difference between sexual assault and rape (please note that these descriptions are graphic). Rape is ultimately broken down as forced sexual intercourse occurring vaginally, anally, or orally with penetration by a body part or object. Sexual assault stops short of rape and attempted rape, but includes unwanted sexual contact, like groping and other physical actions.

## How Do I Know if it's Rape?

Essentially, whether a sexual act can be considered rape boils down to consent. Both individuals must be old enough to consent to the act. There are different ages of consent for each state, but most frequently, the age of consent is 16 or 18. If one of the participants is under the age of consent, that individual is considered a child and as such, he or she cannot legally agree to have sex.

Both participants must also have the capacity to consent. Some individuals with mental disabilities and those who are drugged, drunk, or unconscious do not have the ability to consent to the sexual act, making it rape. Again, definitions of these categories vary by state.

Finally, both parties must have agreed to engage in the sexual act. Physical force and threats of violence make the act one of rape. And even if you've already started having sex, if one individual says "No" or "Stop" and the act continues, it is rape.

## Statistics:

- 60% of sexual assaults are not reported to the police.
- 80% of victims are women under the age of 30.
- 1 out of every 6 American women has been a victim of rape, attempted or completed.
- 3% of American men have been victims of attempted or completed rape.
- 15% of assault and rape victims are under the age of 12.
- 73% of the time, the perpetrator is not a stranger.
- 38% of the time, the rapist is a friend or acquaintance.



## RESOURCES

**Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network**

[www.rainn.org](http://www.rainn.org)

**National Sexual Violence Resource Center**

[www.nsvrc.org](http://www.nsvrc.org)

**Office for Victims of Crime**

[www.crimevictims.gov](http://www.crimevictims.gov)

**National Center for the Victims of Crime**

[www.victimsofcrime.org/](http://www.victimsofcrime.org/)

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## Reducing the Risk of Sexual Assault

Unfortunately, there is no surefire way to prevent sexual assault or rape. There are steps you can take, however, to reduce your risk of assault.

- In social situations, stay with your friends and don't leave with strangers.
- If drinking is involved, do not accept drinks from strangers and always keep your drink with you.
- Avoid isolated areas when possible and always stay aware of your surroundings.
- Always keep your cell phone handy and charged.
- If you're feeling uncomfortable or unsafe, leave.

## Effects of Sexual Assault

Obviously, sexual assault and rape are devastating and traumatic events for the victims. And these acts can result in long-lasting and difficult effects. Victims may find themselves feeling suicidal, depressed, guilty, shameful, numb, or compelled to self-injure. They may develop Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) wherein they experience severe feelings of stress and anxiety as well as intense flashbacks and dreams of the event.

Those who have been assaulted are more likely to develop substance abuse issues, sleeping and eating disorders, and other physical maladies, including stomach problems, headaches or migraines, and light headedness.

## What do I do if I've been Sexually Assaulted or Raped?

First and foremost, know that what has happened is not your fault. It will take time to heal and recover, but don't be afraid to ask for help.

- Get to a safe place and contact someone you trust. Call 9-1-1 for assistance.
- You need to preserve all the evidence of the assault. This means you should not bathe, eat, smoke, wash your hands, or change clothes.
- Write down all the information you can about the assault. This includes details about the attacker, location, time, etc.
- Get medical attention as soon as you can. You may be at risk for sexually transmitted diseases and, for women, pregnancy. The health care professional should conduct a Sexual Assault Forensic Exam, also known as a rape kit. This exam will collect things like blood, hair, urine, and body secretion samples that can be used as evidence in legal proceedings.
- Seek out counseling and support services.



## Coping with the Aftermath

The healing process after a sexual assault can be lengthy and fraught with challenges. However, there are numerous support services out there that can provide the help you need. The National Sexual Assault Hotline, 1-800-656-HOPE, offers confidential counseling as well as information about local resources and support groups.

During recovery, you'll also want to pay special attention to taking care of yourself. This means exercising, getting plenty of sleep, and maintaining a regular and healthy eating schedule. Things like meditation and keeping a journal can help you manage all the emotions you're experiencing as well.

Personal relationships are another important part of healing. Spend time with those people who make you feel good about yourself and support you. You may find that you're more sensitive to and aware of relationships that leave you feeling depressed, belittled, or stressed out. Limit your interactions with these people as these relationships will do little to assist your recovery.

And don't forget about having fun. Take part in leisure activities, develop new hobbies, or join social clubs or sporting groups. New relationships and interests are a great way to help you heal and grow.

## How Can I Help?

If you're aware that someone is in danger of being sexually assaulted, assess the risk, and if appropriate, offer assistance. If there is a risk of personal danger, call 9-1-1. If possible, you should remain at the scene. Your presence is likely to dissuade the attacker.

At parties and other social gatherings, use the buddy system with friends and keep an eye out for each other. Don't let friends leave with strangers and offer to call a cab for those who are intoxicated.

If you know someone who's been sexually assaulted, the best things you can do are listen, be supportive, and don't be judgmental. Offer your assistance if your friend needs help getting medical attention or reporting the assault. Encourage your friend to report the assault to the authorities and to contact the National Sexual Assault Hotline. Your support and strength will help your friend get through this difficult time.

