

After an assault: medical care

It is important to get medical care after a sexual assault as soon as possible. You may have injuries you don't know about or your injuries may be worse than you think. You may also be at risk for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) or unintended pregnancy. Healthcare providers can examine you for injuries and provide treatment for STIs. In some cases, you can also get medication that will prevent STIs or pregnancy. Keeping your body healthy is an important part of healing from the assault.

Where to Go

Where you go to receive care is up to you. You may choose to go to the hospital, a medical clinic, school health services, or your personal doctor. If you are receiving a forensic exam (discussed in the Evidence Collection section of this book), medical professionals can also provide other medical care at that time. If your injuries are severe or your doctor recommends treatment they cannot provide, they may advise you to go to the hospital for further care.

No matter where you go, you have a say in your own medical care. You have the right to refuse any exams, tests, or treatments that you do not feel comfortable with or do not wish to participate in.

Mandatory Reporting

If you are under 18, medical providers are required to report to law enforcement if you seek treatment related to sexual assault. If you are over 18, medical providers are only required to report if you have been seriously injured as a result of the sexual assault. Otherwise, it is up to you whether or not to make a report to law enforcement. For more information about talking to law enforcement, see the Talking to Law Enforcement section of this book.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Health information is considered private and confidential. You have a right to have it protected. Your healthcare provider can talk to you about your privacy before you get care.

Generally, if you are 18 years old or older, medical personnel cannot share information about you without your permission. There are some exceptions and your healthcare provider should tell you what they are. If you are under 18 years old, your parent or guardian must give consent for you to have most medical testing or treatment. However, in Nebraska, your parent/guardian does not need to give consent or be notified if you want to get testing or treatment for sexually transmitted infections.

If you are using health insurance to pay for your medical care, the healthcare provider will need to provide information about the treatment you received for billing purposes. Your provider can talk to you about what information is shared. If you get health insurance through your partner, spouse, or parents, they may have access to any information provided to the insurance company.

If you are concerned about what is included in your permanent medical record, you can ask that medical personnel not include certain information unless absolutely necessary. You can also ask that they place necessary information in a note that cannot be seen by everyone who has access to the file.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

It is possible to get infections such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and herpes from sexual assault. Symptoms of an STI may not show up for several weeks. Your healthcare provider will assess and treat for these infections if appropriate. After treatment, it is recommended that you have a follow-up appointment with your healthcare provider within 3 days.

HIV

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that can lead to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). It is possible to get HIV from a sexual assault. Unlike some other viruses, the body cannot get rid of HIV. That means once you have HIV, you have it for life. PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) can reduce the chance of contracting HIV if you are exposed. PEP involves taking medications that keeps the virus from making copies of itself. These medications must be prescribed by a doctor. The sooner PEP starts, the more likely it is to work. PEP must start within 3 days (72 hrs) after possible exposure to be effective. If you believe you may have been exposed to HIV, talk to a healthcare provider as soon as possible.

Emergency Contraception

Emergency Contraception (EC) is a type of birth control that can help prevent pregnancy after a sexual assault. A common form of EC is “Plan B,” or the “morning after pill.” Depending on where you are in your cycle, Plan B could prevent or delay ovulation or prevent fertilization of an egg. It is also possible that Plan B prevents implantation of a fertilized egg in the uterus. In order to be most effective, the pills must be started within 3 days (72 hours). Plan B does not cause an abortion and does not affect the development of a fetus once it is implanted in the uterus. Plan B is available over the counter at most drugstores without a prescription or proof of age. Some hospitals, health clinics, or pharmacists with religious affiliations may not offer EC due to their religious beliefs. However, an advocate from the local sexual assault/domestic violence program can provide information to help to obtain this medication.

Payment

You or your insurance may be billed for any testing or treatment related to your medical care. Your healthcare provider can talk to you about payment options. Your local sexual assault/domestic violence program can also provide information about financial assistance options in your community.

Evidence Collection

If the sexual assault occurred within the past 5 days (120 hours) and you are considering telling the police about the assault, you can choose to have evidence collected. More information about evidence collection is provided in the Evidence Collection section of this book.

Advocate Support

Advocates from your local sexual assault/domestic violence program are available 24 hours a day to talk on the phone or meet you at the hospital, medical clinic, or police station. They can provide information and offer resources, support, and assistance. To find the program nearest you, see the Finding Services section of this book, visit www.nebraskacoalition.org, or call the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network at 1-800-656-HOPE (4673). Services are free and confidential.