

Relationships, Safety, and Violence

Every woman has the right to live her life safely and free of violence. Yet one in four women in the United States experiences intimate partner violence,¹ including domestic abuse, verbal and emotional abuse, and stalking. Women experience violence in many ways, from physical abuse to sexual assault and from financial abuse to sexual harassment or human trafficking. Whatever form it takes, violence against women can have serious long-term physical and emotional effects. If you've experienced violence or abuse, it is never your fault, and you can get help.

Q: Am I being abused?

A: Signs of abuse may include a partner or family member:

- Keeping track of everything you do, where you go, and who you're with
- Being jealous, controlling, or angry
- Demeaning you (putting you down or humiliating you in front of others)
- Physically hurting, or threatening to hurt, you or your loved ones
- Forcing you to have sex or other intimate activity

Q: What can I do if I'm being abused?

A: Your safety is the most important concern. **If you are in immediate danger, call 911.**

If you are not in immediate danger, consider these options:

- **Get medical care.** If you are injured, go to a local hospital emergency room or urgent care center.
- **Call a helpline for free, anonymous help.** Call one of the hotlines listed on this fact sheet for 24-hour support and numbers for other resources, such as local domestic violence shelters.

- **Make a safety plan to leave.** You don't have to leave an abusive relationship right away. A safety plan with a safe place to go and a list of important documents and medicines to take will help if you need to leave in a hurry.
- **Save the evidence.** Keep evidence of abuse, such as pictures of your injuries or threatening emails or texts, in a place the abuser cannot get to.
- **Talk to someone.** This might be a supportive family member, friend, co-worker, or spiritual leader. Look for ways to get emotional help, like a support group or mental health professional.
- **Consider getting a restraining order.** Protection orders, often called restraining orders, are meant to keep you safe from a person who is harassing or hurting you. The police can arrest a person who violates a restraining order and charge them with a crime.

Q: What should I do if I've been sexually assaulted or raped?

A: If you can, get away from the person who assaulted you and get to a safe place as fast as you can.

- **Don't wash or clean your body.** Don't wash, brush, or clean any part of your body, including your teeth. You might wash away important evidence. Don't change clothes, if possible. Don't touch or change anything at the scene of the assault. That way, the local police will have physical evidence from the person who assaulted you.
- **Get medical care.** Call 911 or go to your nearest hospital emergency room. The doctor or nurse may give you medicine to prevent HIV and some other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and emergency contraception to prevent pregnancy.

Ask if there is a sexual assault forensic examiner (SAFE) or a sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) available. This person has special training to use a rape kit to collect evidence.

- **If you think you were drugged**, talk to the hospital staff about testing for date rape drugs, such as Rohypnol and GHB (gamma-hydroxybutyric acid). Date rape drugs pass through the body quickly and may not be detectable by the time you get tested.
- **Reach out for help.** The hospital staff can connect you with local sexual assault and rape resources that can help you cope with emotions and trauma afterward.
- **Report the assault or rape to the police.** You do not have to decide whether to press charges while at the hospital. An advocate or counselor can help you understand how to report the crime.
- **If the person who assaulted you was a stranger, write down as many details** as you can remember about the person and what happened.

Q: What are the effects of violence against women?

A: Violence against women, including sexual or physical violence, is linked to physical and mental health problems.

Physical effects of sexual violence can include:

- Vaginal bleeding or pelvic pain
- Unwanted pregnancy
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Trouble sleeping or nightmares
- Health problems such as arthritis, asthma, digestive problems, heart problems, and problems with the immune system
- Chronic pain
- Migraine headaches
- Stress

Long-term mental health effects can include:

- Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Depression
- Anxiety

For more information...

about relationships, violence and safety, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, (CDC), HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov

National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs
212-714-1141 • www.avp.org/index.php

National Domestic Violence Hotline
800-799-SAFE (7233) • www.thehotline.org

National Sexual Assault Hotline
800-656-HOPE (4673) • www.rainn.org

Victim Connect Resource Center, National Center for Victims of Crime
855-484-2846 • www.victimconnect.org

All material contained in this fact sheet is free of copyright restrictions and may be copied, reproduced, or duplicated without permission of the Office on Women's Health in the Department of Health and Human Services. Citation of the source is appreciated.

¹ Reference: Smith, S.G., Chen, J., Basile, K.C., Gilbert, L.K., Merrick, M.T., Patel, N., Walling, M., & Jain, A. (2017). The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Page last updated: October 5, 2017. Content last reviewed: May 15, 2017.



www.facebook.com/HHSOWH



www.twitter.com/WomensHealth



www.youtube.com/WomensHealthgov

www.womenshealth.gov | 800-994-9662