

# Sexual violence

Office for Women  
Infosheet

Surviving and healing

July 2009

This infosheet provides practical information to help you if you have experienced sexual violence or to support someone you know who was subjected to sexual violence.

## What is sexual violence?

The term sexual violence refers to any unwanted behaviour of a sexual nature directed towards a person. It includes a number of behaviours and below are some terms you may hear in relation to sexual violence. Regardless of the term used, **all sexual violence is a crime.**

### Rape

A person rapes another person if they have, or attempt to have, carnal knowledge of another person without that person's consent. This includes penetration of the vulva, vagina or anus; or penetration of the mouth, to any extent, with a penis. Consent is not given if there is any force, threat, intimidation, fear, use of authority (eg. threat by a boss or supervisor), or false or fraudulent representation (eg. someone pretending to be a doctor giving an examination). A child under 16 years old cannot give consent.

### Date rape

Date rape refers to an act of sexual violence which is perpetrated by someone that you may be dating or have met socially.

### Drink spiking

The terms 'date rape drug' or 'drink spiking' refer to a situation where a drug has been used with the intention of forcing a person into an unwanted sexual act. While a number of different drugs have been linked with sexual violence, alcohol – which is added to a drink without the person's knowledge – is the most common drug used to make a person vulnerable to an unwanted sexual act.

### Incest

Incest is a form of abuse in which a person is forced into sexual activity with a member of their family or step-family.

### Sexual assault

Sexual assault is any unwanted sexual touching or exposure to unwanted sexual behaviour. For example, being groped or touched on the breast or being flashed (that is, someone displaying their genitals in public).

## Women's Infolink

Women's Infolink provides an information and referral service about health, safety, financial security and equity issues for Queensland women. It offers information about Office for Women programs, seminars, events, fact sheets and publications.

Monday to Friday 8am to 6pm

Women's Infolink 1800 177 577  
[www.women.qld.gov.au](http://www.women.qld.gov.au)

Telephone Translator Service 13 14 50  
TTY (07) 3877 8226

## Infosheet series

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## Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is any form of sexual attention that is unwelcome. It can include unwelcome touching or other physical contact, remarks with sexual connotations, requests for sexual favours, leering, or the display of offensive material. Sexual harassment is unlawful and applies to both men and women. In Queensland, sexual harassment is not restricted to the workplace and applies in all situations. In other states or territories this term may apply only to the workplace.

## Up-skirting or secret filming

The term 'up-skirting' refers to a situation where a person has used a concealed camera to film under someone else's clothing, such as a woman's skirt. It is an offence in Queensland to secretly film a person's private parts or when they are in a private place (such as a bathroom or change area) engaging in a private act. It is also an offence to distribute any images of these private acts.

## How big is the problem of sexual violence?

Sexual violence is a crime which is grossly underreported and for which offences vary from state to state, so the exact number of people who have been subjected to sexual violence is unknown. However, a number of recent surveys have given an indication of the extent of the problem.

- The Australian Study of Health and Relationships surveyed approximately 20,000 Australians and found that 21% of Australian women and 5% of Australian men have reported being forced or frightened into doing something sexually they did not want to do. According to the survey, about half were 16 years or younger the first time it occurred and only a third (both men and women) had talked to anyone about their experience.

- The Australian Bureau of Statistics' 2005 Personal Safety Survey found that, since the age of 15 years, 16.8% of women and 4.8% of men had experienced sexual assault. Of the women who had experienced sexual violence:
  - 22% was by a stranger
  - 21% was by a previous partner
  - 39% was by a family member or friend
  - 32% was by another known person.
- Research has also shown that an overwhelming majority of women and men who have been forced into sexual acts have been forced to do so by men.

The impact of these crimes on the individuals concerned, their friends and families, and the community generally, cannot be overstated.

## What should you do if you have experienced sexual violence?

If you or a friend or a family member have been subjected to sexual violence, it is important to get to a safe place as soon as possible. If you are in immediate danger, call the police on 000 or go to the emergency department at the local hospital.

Once you are in a safe place, contact the statewide Sexual Assault Helpline on 1800 010 120 or Kids Help Line on 1800 551 800 (or have someone call this number for you) as soon as possible. These services are free and confidential and available 24 hours a day. They can talk to you about options to assist you. These options can include:

- counselling and support, including information on sexual assault, follow-up services, and your rights as a victim of crime
- medical care
- medical examination which provides forensic information for legal purposes
- testing for sexually transmitted infections
- emergency contraception.

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Surviving and healing

If you are thinking of reporting the attack to the police it is best not to change your clothes, comb your hair or wash yourself until you have spoken with the police or a local health service. This may provide evidence should you choose to take legal action. It is important to try and keep as much evidence as possible.

If you decide to have a medical examination, the medical officer will talk with you and check how you are feeling. The medical officer will discuss with you the possibility of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. They can also gather information as evidence in case you go ahead with the police and legal action.

If you think you may be at risk of pregnancy, you might like to consider the option of talking to a doctor about emergency contraception.

## Reactions to sexual violence

Survivors of sexual violence can experience a range of effects which can have both a short-term or long-term impact on their day-to-day functioning and on their emotional, physical and spiritual wellbeing.

An experience of sexual violence can be a traumatic experience that can have lasting effects. Every survivor copes in whatever way they can. Each person's reaction will differ depending on their feelings about themselves, their previous experiences and circumstances; for example, age, cultural background and physical ability. A person may have had previous experiences of sexual violence, which can impact on their reactions to an assault.

Facing the implications of sexual violence can be overwhelming and many survivors may find they wish to downplay or avoid the pain that they and their friends and family are experiencing.

All survivors are strong and brave people who have coped with a traumatic experience and need support and understanding from those close to them.

Family and friends of a survivor can also be affected by an act of sexual violence. It can be shocking and frightening when someone you care about has been attacked and you may also share feelings of being unsafe, as well as intense anger and hatred for the attacker. Friends and family may wish to take control of the situation in their desire to help, but it is very important for them to respect the decisions that the survivor makes about their healing.

Another common reaction by both survivors and friends and family members is the feeling that the survivor could have done something to avoid the attack. Remember, **no one asks or deserves to be a victim of sexual violence.** All responsibility remains with the person who commits the abuse. If you were attacked or abused, you are not to blame.

## Getting help

The effects of sexual violence can be devastating, but healing is possible. The after effects of a trauma can be painful and confusing. Information about sexual violence can help you understand your reactions to the trauma whether you are a survivor or are supporting a survivor.

It may also help to make sense of your reactions by talking to supportive people like friends, family or counsellors; by reading or watching videos about sexual violence and its effects; or by writing down your feelings. The contacts listed on this sheet are good places to start.

## Supporting someone who has experienced sexual violence

If you know someone who has experienced sexual violence then the most important help you can offer is to support them in their chosen approach to healing. Let them know clearly what it is that you can offer and what other resources are available. Be open and supportive in discussing their options, but avoid telling them what to do.

In supporting a survivor, it is important to listen and believe what they are saying and feeling. Recognise that they have been through a traumatic event and may need time, space and energy to cope with their feelings. Respect their strength as a survivor and understand they may wish to focus solely on their own needs for a while and the decisions they are making are the right ones for them at this time.

It is important to avoid taking charge or seeking details of the attack, and instead, ask them what they need from you. Don't ignore or smooth over the effects of the attack, focus on or excuse the offender, or blame them for the attack. Instead, reaffirm what they are feeling – pain, anger, fear and shame are all natural responses to a sexual violence attack.

Lastly, encourage them to seek help in whatever manner they feel is right for them, and don't forget to also seek help for yourself, because you can also be affected by the attack. Your feelings are important, but you cannot expect the survivor to be able to help you – they need to concentrate on their own healing.

A professional counsellor or social worker can help you understand your own reactions, as well as the survivor's, in a confidential manner. If you wish to talk to another friend or family member, seek the survivor's permission before you discuss their experiences with someone else as they may not want that person to know what has happened to them.

## Can sexual violence be avoided?

Women are repeatedly told various safety guidelines from an early age including 'don't dress provocatively', 'don't walk alone especially after dark', 'don't talk to strangers', 'don't park in dark areas' etc. While many of these rules are well meaning and can be helpful in avoiding general crime, they perpetuate the myths of sexual violence that the victim could have done something to avoid it, if they had not broken the 'rules'.

The true nature of sexual violence is that the perpetrator is more than likely to be known to the person and that the majority of incidents occur in a residential dwelling. Most of the 'rules' we are told from childhood have very little impact on avoiding sexual violence.

Instead of focusing on rules it is best to join in activities which will help build your confidence and self esteem, enabling you to deal assertively, and if needed aggressively, with an attacker. But always remember, **all responsibility for sexual violence remains with the person who commits the crime.**

### Disclaimer

*The information contained in this infosheet is correct at the time of publishing. The information is not intended to constitute advice, nor does it propose or discuss government policy directions.*

## Contacts

### Women's Infolink

For referral to a service nearest to you.  
1800 177 577

### Office for Women 'Find a Service'

Online service locator of more than 2000 government and community services for women.  
[www.women.qld.gov.au/findaservice](http://www.women.qld.gov.au/findaservice)

### Brisbane Sexual Assault Service

State-wide 7.30am - midnight, 7 days  
1800 010 120  
Brisbane metropolitan area emergency assistance (24 hours) (07) 3636 5206

### Zig Zag Young Women's Resource Centre

(07) 3843 1823

### Immigrant Women's Support Service

(07) 3846 5400

### Child abuse services

#### Department of Communities - Child Safety Services

Office hours  
1800 811 810 or (07) 3224 8045

After hours  
Child Safety After Hours Service Centre (24-hour service)  
1800 177 135 or (07) 3235 9999  
[www.childsafety.qld.gov.au](http://www.childsafety.qld.gov.au)

### Kids Help Line

24-hour service  
1800 551 800

### Sexual harassment services

#### Anti-Discrimination Commission of Queensland

1300 130 670  
TTY 1300 130 680

### Health services

#### Women's Health

Brisbane metropolitan (07) 3839 9988  
Outside Brisbane metropolitan 1800 017 676  
[www.womhealth.org.au](http://www.womhealth.org.au)

#### Queensland Health – 13 Health

13 43 25 84 (24 hours)  
[www.health.qld.gov.au](http://www.health.qld.gov.au)

#### National project on drink spiking

[www.aic.gov.au/publications/reports/2004-11-drinkspiking.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/reports/2004-11-drinkspiking.html)

*1800 numbers are free unless from a mobile phone. 13 and 1300 numbers are at local call cost unless from a mobile phone.*