

Getting specialist medical help after sexual assault

It's normal to feel anxious about seeking medical help after you have experienced any type of sexual violence (sexual assault, sexual harm, or rape). We hope that reading this pamphlet will help you to understand why seeing a medical service can be a good thing, even if the assault happened a long time ago, and whether or not you want to involve the police. A specialist sexual assault medical service (called SAATS – Sexual Abuse Assessment and Treatment Service) can make sure you are okay and help deal with any concerns you may have about your health.

What a specialist sexual assault medical service can offer

Reassurance

By having a medical examination, just knowing that you are physically okay can give great relief, a sense of control, and can be an important step towards recovery.

Medical examination for recent and past assault

You can have a medical examination even if you don't want to involve the police. A medical examination will help assess:

- **Injuries:** for assessment and treatment. If you would like to involve the police, any injuries can be documented for police reporting.
- **Sexually transmitted infections (STIs):** A full STI check can be provided along with any preventative treatment.
- **Pregnancy:** treatment can be provided to prevent pregnancy within the first few days.
- **Psychological needs:** Emotional effects from what has happened are common and finding the right support for this is something most people need help with. Everyone reacts differently in these situations. Some people will want to talk to someone soon, others will want to do so later. An ACC claim can be lodged that will let you access funded counselling at any time in the future.

Forensic examination after a recent assault

If the assault happened within seven days:

- You can choose to have an examination that can include the collection of samples for evidence (forensic examination) and make a statement to the police. Ideally this is done as soon as possible after the assault as evidence is lost over time.
- If you don't know whether you want the police involved and want to leave your options open, that's okay. The clinician can do a forensic examination, but instead of giving this evidence to the police, it can be safely stored for you until you have had time to decide what you want to do. The team will let you know how long it can be stored for.

Note: No medical examination of any sort will be done without your full consent.

Referral to other support services

- **Immediate crisis support** (refuges/safe accommodation)
- **Counselling services**
- **Court support services and ACC**

Who will be present at the examination?

There will be a specially trained doctor and nurse (clinicians) at the examination. In some areas a crisis support person may also be available to attend, but it is up to you if they are present during the examination. The police will not be present during the examination, even if you have spoken to them.

Can I bring someone to the examination with me?

It's often easier to talk openly with as few people present as possible, but you are welcome to bring someone with you for support if you wish (friend, relative, or member of your whānau). It's okay if you don't want them there during parts of the examination.

Do I need to bring anything with me?

If the sexual assault happened within the last seven days, and you are considering involving the police, bring along any clothing that you were wearing when you were assaulted. Often the clothing will be collected when a forensic examination is conducted, so you may want to bring a spare change of clothing with you. Some replacement clothing can be provided.

What happens at an examination?

The clinician will ask you about:

- Your medical health, treatments you are on, contraception, and your mental and sexual health history. This information will help them to look after your health needs. If you do choose to report to the Police, the clinician will not pass on all of this confidential information to them.
- Any symptoms or concerns that you have.
- The details of the sexual assault so that they can decide what sort of an examination they need to do.

The physical examination

- If you are comfortable the clinician will examine you.
- Not everybody needs the same sort of examination.
- The clinician may suggest performing an examination of your body including your genital area.
- The clinician will make sure you feel safe and keep everything as private as possible.
- You can stop at any time you wish.

Evidence collection

If the assault happened within seven days:

- The clinician may collect evidence (if you choose to have a forensic examination – whether or not you have decided to report to the police at this stage).
- This can include swabs taken for semen and saliva, blood and urine tests, clothing and hair samples.
- If you choose to report to the police, the police will collect this evidence and scientists will examine it and provide results and a report to the police.
- If you haven't yet decided whether or not to involve the police, this evidence can be stored safely for you by the specialist medical service until you have decided what to do.

Treatment

The clinician will:

- If necessary, treat and provide advice on any injuries you may have.
- Refer you on for additional medical assessment and treatment e.g. if you have more serious injuries or health needs, the clinician can refer you to a hospital doctor for assessment and treatment.
- Help with any concerns you have about pregnancy and infection (chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, HIV/AIDS, syphilis).

Information about support services

- The clinician will provide you with information on how you can get counselling and help from other support services.

How long will the examination take?

Examinations can take different amounts of time.

- Medical examination – usually about one hour but may be longer.
- Forensic examination – usually about one to two hours but may be longer.

Is there anything I can do to protect forensic evidence before an examination?

If you are considering making a report to the police, the sooner you are seen after a sexual assault, the more likely it is that the clinician will be able to collect forensic evidence to help with a police investigation. However, they understand that people often don't want to get help straight away. Often people are seen for a forensic examination up to seven days after the assault. If you do wait, there are some things you can do to make sure the clinician can get as much forensic evidence as possible:

- Avoid washing, showering or bathing
- If you need to pass urine, press your underwear to your vagina or penis before going to the toilet and avoid wiping afterwards
- If you have been anally assaulted, and need to poo, press your underwear to your anus before going to the toilet, and avoid wiping afterwards
- Keep the clothing you were wearing at the time of the assault and don't wash it

Even if you haven't done these things, there may still be some forensic evidence and it's still worth being seen for a medical examination to check that you are physically okay.

Will I be seen again after the examination?

The clinician may offer you a follow up appointment, or they may advise you (or you may prefer) to see your own family doctor/GP.

If the examination was normal does that mean that a sexual assault didn't happen?

NO. Many people think that there are always injuries to the genital or other areas after a sexual assault, which the clinician will be able to see. But this isn't necessarily the case. In fact, most people do not have any injuries and have normal examinations.

There are several reasons why you may not have visible injuries after an assault including:

- The type of contact that happened, for example touching, kissing, doesn't cause injury.
- Your genital tissues are stretchy and allow things to go inside without necessarily causing an injury.
- A small injury happened, but it healed by the time you were examined.

Is my information confidential?

- **Police** - If you are reporting to the police then the clinician will need to give them some information. This will include what you told the clinician about the events of the sexual assault and any relevant information and examination findings.
- **GP** – With your permission, the clinician can send a brief letter to your GP, informing them of what has happened to you.

Your information will be kept confidential unless you give permission to pass information on. There is one exception to this – the specialist medical services are required by law to disclose information if they have serious concerns about your health or safety.

How to access a specialist sexual assault medical service (SAATS)

There are several ways:

- You can access a service directly without a referral. **SAATS-Link** (<https://www.saats-link.nz>) will show you a map of medical sexual assault clinics around the country, and how to get in touch with your nearest crisis support agency if you want counselling or advice
- Ask the **Police** to refer you
- Ask your **GP, Family Planning Clinic or Sexual Health Clinic** to refer you
- Ask the **Hospital or 24 Hour surgery** to refer you
- Ask **Oranga Tamariki** (previously known as CYFs) to refer you if you are under 18

Can I talk to someone about my options?

YES, you can, there is a national Helpline.

For free 24/7 confidential contact with trained specialists who can connect you to sexual harm support services in your community, you can get in touch with **Safe to talk:**

- **Online via webchat** - <https://www.safetotalk.nz>
- **Phone** – 0800 044 334
- **Text** - 4334
- **Email** – support@safetotalk.nz

You can also contact your **local crisis support service** directly by clicking on your region on the SAATS-Link map (<https://www.saats-link.nz>)

This leaflet has been adapted from information provided on the Cambridge Clinic website. To access this information in full go to: <http://www.cambridgeclinic.co.nz>