

Sexual assault & cervical screening

A resource for health care professionals



It is important for health care professionals to support women who have experienced sexual assault to access cervical screening in a safe and comfortable environment.

What is sexual assault?

Sexual assault is any behaviour of a sexual nature that a person has not agreed to, that makes them feel uncomfortable, frightened, intimidated or threatened. 1 in 5 women in Australia has experienced sexual violence¹.

The link between sexual assault and cervical screening

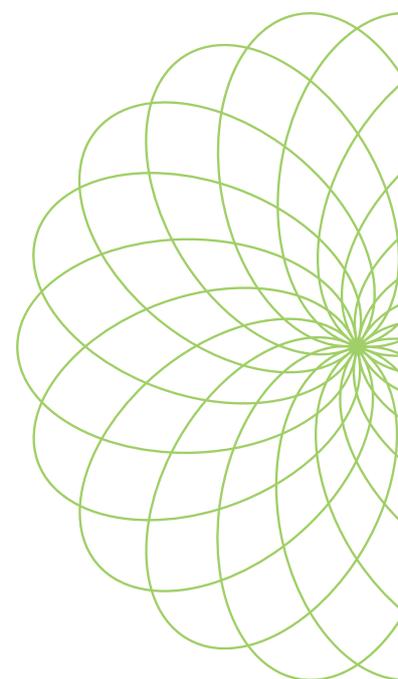
Research² shows that some women who have encountered sexual assault are more likely to avoid regular cervical screening, as the invasive nature of the procedure can induce:

- feelings of vulnerability, helplessness or shame
- memories or flashbacks
- embarrassment
- fear, pain and/or anxiety
- physical and emotional discomfort.

Impacts of sexual assault

The impacts of sexual assault have been shown to be extensive and include:

- depression
- anxiety
- problematic substance use
- disordered eating
- suicidal thoughts/self-injury including to the genitals
- post-trauma responses including flashbacks, nightmares and hypervigilance and dissociation
- issues with trust, intimacy and relationships.



Supporting women who have experienced sexual assault to have cervical screening

While the following points are best practice guidelines for all women, these are particularly important when working with women who have experienced sexual assault.

- ▶ Offer a preliminary appointment to build rapport and trust with the woman and then make a subsequent appointment for her to return for cervical screening.
- ▶ Reassure the woman that the consultation is private and confidential.
- ▶ Take the time to explain the procedure to the woman and offer to show her the speculum or sampling instruments.
- ▶ Encourage her to ask any questions that will reduce her anxiety.
- ▶ Provide the woman with the option to bring along a friend or relative for support.
- ▶ Remind her that she is in control and can stop at any time.
- ▶ Instruct her on calming and deep breathing techniques to help her relax.
- ▶ Elevate the pelvis with a cushion rather than the woman using her fists.
- ▶ Offer the woman the option to insert her own speculum.

It is essential that you are responsive to the emotional and physical reactions of each woman and adjust your approach accordingly.

How to ask about sexual assault

In your role as a health care professional you will need to use your judgement and experience to determine if and when to ask about sexual assault.

If you choose to, there are many ways you can begin to ask about a possible history of past trauma/sexual assault.

For example:

- ▶ *'Have you ever had an uncomfortable cervical screen experience in the past? If so, it may be helpful to let me know why this was difficult for you.'*
- ▶ *'Have you had any experiences that might impact you having a cervical screening test?'*
- ▶ *'We know that sexual assault is very common and we do know that it can impact on sexual health. Is there anything you want to talk about today?'*

Responding to a disclosure of sexual assault

In instances where a woman does disclose a history of sexual assault and/or past trauma it is advisable that as a health care professional you:

- ▶ **Use clear statements that show you believe/accept the woman's story and wish to support her.**

– *'It must have been hard for you to tell me about this.'*

– *'Would you like to talk with someone more about the impact this has had on you?'*

- ▶ **Offer appropriate referral options.**

Women who would like to talk to a qualified counsellor can call 1800 737 732 (1800 RESPECT) where they will be connected to the National Sexual Assault, Domestic Family Violence Counselling Service. Call this number to access counselling delivered by qualified professionals 24-hours a day, seven days a week. Enquire about services in your state or territory.

Debriefing and secondary consultation for you as a health professional

Before or after a consultation with a woman impacted by sexual assault, if you are in Victoria, you can call the Centres Against Sexual Assault (CASA) for debriefing and secondary consultation. Call 1800 806 292 during business hours to be connected to your local CASA to speak with the Duty Counsellor.

REFERENCES

- 1] Cox, P. (2015) Violence against women: Additional analysis of the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey 2012, Horizons Research Report, Issue 1, Australia's National Research Organisation for Women's Safety (ANROWS), Sydney; and Woodlock, D., Healey, L., Howe, K., McGuire, M., Geddes, V. and Granek, S. (2014) Voices against violence paper one: Summary report and recommendations, Women with Disabilities Victoria, Office of the Public Advocate and Domestic Violence Resource Centre Victoria.
- 2] Carlson, K (2002), *Barriers to Cervical Screening Experienced by Victim/Survivors of Sexual Assault – Pilot Study*, The Royal Women's Hospital and CASA House.