Sexual Assault Forensic Exams

FACT SHEET

Introduction

Sexual Assault Forensic Examinations (SAFEs) are **free medical exams** offered in hospitals across the state of Maryland. Each jurisdiction in Maryland has a hospital with a SAFE program, although these exams are NOT available at every hospital. SAFEs are given to survivors of Sexual Assault after an assault has occurred. They are administered by specially trained Forensic Nurse Examiners (FNEs) and include two major elements: **medical attention** and **evidence collection**.

During the medical care process, the survivor receives acute injury care and may be prescribed medication for the prevention of sexual transmitted infections (STIs), HIV, and pregnancy.

The evidence collection process may include taking photos of injuries, collecting clothing, and taking DNA samples. This evidence will be collected and kept in a Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK), commonly known as "rape kits."

When and where should survivors receive a SAFE?

It is important to receive medical attention as soon as possible after a sexual assault, even if the survivor does not have cuts and bruises. They should try not to shower, clean themself, or urinate after an attack, but even if they have, it should not stop them from getting to a hospital as soon as possible- they CAN still receive an examination.[1]

As of 2020 in Maryland, SAFEs are offered to victims of sexual assault free of charge for up to **15 days** after the sexual assault.[2] Even if a survivor does not receive a SAFE immediately following the assault, they still have time to do so.

Survivors of sexual assault can receive a SAFE at any hospital with a SAFE program. Survivors do not have to receive a SAFE in the county where they were assaulted.

What happens when a survivor arrives at a hospital with a SAFE program?

- Step 1: Report to the Emergency Room and ask for a SAFE.
- Step 2: A medical professional will address any immediate medical needs.
- Step 3: A forensic nurse examiner (FNE) will conduct the SAFE.

The hospital may ask the survivor if they would like a victim advocate to provide support doing the exam. If the opportunity to speak with an advocate is not given to a survivor, they may request one from their FNE.

During the exam, survivors may be asked to answer questions about their medical and sexual history. These may be uncomfortable to answer, but it is important to answer them honestly in order to receive the best treatment possible.[3]

Does a survivor have to talk to the police to get a SAFE?

No. A SAFE can be done anonymously. A survivor's SAEK will be stored for 20 years as an anonymous kit. If the survivor chooses to involve law enforcement later, the evidence will be available to use in the investigation.

SAFEs for Underserved Populations

Sexual assault disproportionately affects underserved populations and, historically, many members of these communities have faced challenges obtaining adequate and timely healthcare services. These past experiences may present barriers to obtaining a SAFE during the critical time after a sexual assault. When understanding the process of obtaining a SAFE, it is important to be aware of and acknowledge these struggles and their effect on individual communities.

In Maryland, FNEs complete a full course of training to help ensure the care they provide is victim-centered and trauma-informed. This includes acknowledging patient concerns and honoring each patient's identity and culture.

[1] Facts for survivors . Ohio Alliance to End Sexual Violence. (n.d.). Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://oaesv.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/oaesv-forensic-exam-fact-sheet.pdf
[2] Md. Code, Crim. Proc. § 11-1007
[3] Information about sexual assault forensic exam. Frostburg State University. (n.d.). Retrieved October 18, 2022, from https://www.frostburg.edu/titleix/getting-help-and-support/info-about-sexual-assault-for ensic-exams/index.php