

## Pregnancy Concerns after Sexual Assault

### How likely is it to fall pregnant after being sexually assaulted?

It is difficult to determine how many pregnancies occur as a result of a sexual assault. A large study in America found that 5% of sexual assaults resulted in a pregnancy.

### What can be done to prevent a pregnancy following a sexual assault?

There is medication available to help decrease the likelihood of pregnancy following a sexual assault or unplanned intercourse. This medication, known as the emergency contraceptive pill (ECP) or more commonly as the 'morning after pill', can be taken up to 5 days after unprotected intercourse.

You can attend The Canberra Sexual Health Centre at The Canberra Hospital and receive the morning after pill for free or buy the morning after pill over the counter at a chemist (no prescription required). The price is dependent on the chemist but generally it costs between \$20-30.

### What can I do if I find that I am pregnant after a sexual assault?

Making a decision about what to do when an unplanned pregnancy is confirmed is often difficult. The options you have are the same as options any woman has when making this decision. These options include:

- Continuing with the pregnancy and raising the child
- Continuing with the pregnancy and having the child placed for adoption
- Having the pregnancy terminated.

Some women do not discover that they are pregnant until the second trimester of the pregnancy (i.e. after 12 weeks). There are many possible explanations for this, but it is important that the pregnancy is confirmed as early as possible so that all the options are available and there is time to consider what to do. *If you miss your period or have concerns regarding pregnancy after a sexual assault, see your GP or attend the Canberra Sexual Health Centre.*

### What if I choose to have a termination of pregnancy?

If you decide to have a termination of pregnancy, you should see your doctor or counsellor for information and referral advice. If you have taken legal action in relation to the sexual assault, you should speak to your doctor or the police about whether evidence of the pregnancy should be collected for use in the criminal investigations.

#### Termination Services in the ACT:

Marie Stopes International 1800 003 707 Canberra City	Capital Gynaecology Australia 6299 5559 Queanbeyan
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### What if I choose to continue with the pregnancy?

Some women choose to continue with the pregnancy. A study found that about one third of the women who were pregnant from a sexual assault decided to continue with the pregnancy and keep the baby. A small number of women continued with the pregnancy and placed the child for adoption.

Confidentiality is an important issue for people who have been sexually assaulted and you may not want to disclose to your doctor or midwife that the pregnancy is a result of the assault. There are advantages however in informing a trusted health worker because issues that may be related to a sexual assault can be understood and addressed.

People who have been sexually assaulted may experience a range of reactions. These reactions may not cause you significant problems related to the pregnancy. However, some women have reported that they have experienced difficulty with being touched and with medical procedures such as vaginal examinations.

Some women have experienced flashbacks of the sexual assault during labour and have difficulties giving birth, breastfeeding or parenting the baby. Also, women can experience increased stress levels as a result of a sexual assault which can impact on their pregnancy experience. Similar problems may also arise for women who have been sexually assaulted in the past or abused as a child. These experiences can be very frightening.

Choosing to tell the doctor, midwife or counsellor may provide you the opportunity to discuss concerns and possible reactions to the pregnancy, labour and the baby. It is recommended that you discuss and consider how you could deal with these reactions if they should arise. You may also want to consider how you can best be supported during pregnancy, labour and when the child is born.

### What if I want to place the baby up for adoption?

Women who want to continue with the pregnancy but would like to place the baby for adoption can receive information from:

The Adoption Information Service information is available at:

<http://www.communityservices.act.gov.au/ocyfs/child-and-youth-protection-services/adoptions>

### Other concerns

There are other factors that may need to be considered when making a decision about what to do when a pregnancy is diagnosed following a sexual assault. These include:

- You may not want anyone, including your partner to know that you have experienced a sexual assault.
- If you have been sexually assaulted and had consenting sexual intercourse with another person around the same time, you may not know whether the pregnancy was from the sexual assault or the consenting intercourse.
- You may be worried about how you will cope with the pregnancy and labour.

- You may be worried about how you will relate to the baby and whether the baby will be accepted into the family.
- You may have concerns about how the child will react if he/she finds out the circumstances surrounding conception.
- You may find it difficult to decide what is best at a time when you are dealing with the impact of a sexual assault.

You could talk with a trusted friend, counsellor or doctor about your feelings and concerns before making the decision about what is best for you.

### **Can testing be done when I am pregnant to find whether my consenting partner is the father of my baby?**

If you have had sex with a consenting partner around the time of the sexual assault and have not been using reliable contraception, it can be very difficult to know who the father of the baby is. You could talk with your doctor about this and it may be possible to answer this question by looking at the timing of the intercourse in relation to your periods. An ultrasound may also be useful in helping to determine this.

If there is no other way of working out who the father of the baby is and finding out would make the difference between keeping the baby or terminating the pregnancy, testing can be done while you are pregnant.

This testing is expensive and there are risks involved with it so you and your partner should consider counselling in order to make the decision about whether to have in utero paternity testing. The test is done by obtaining a sample of the baby's DNA through either amniocentesis or chorionic villous sampling, and comparing the results with results of testing done on a blood sample from you and your partner. It is possible to determine from this testing whether your consenting partner is the father of the baby.

*It is not possible to do this without your partner's knowledge and consent.*

### **I was pregnant when I was sexually assaulted. Will my baby be harmed?**

The majority of people who are sexually assaulted are not seriously injured and in most cases the baby will not be harmed. However, if the woman has been seriously injured or hit in the abdomen, the risk of harm to the baby is greater. In any case, it is important to see the doctor to check that the baby is OK.

*If you have any contractions, bleeding or tummy pain following a sexual assault, it is important to go to the Emergency Department straight away.*

### **Domestic violence and pregnancy**

There are many considerations for a woman who is in an abusive relationship and is pregnant. Domestic violence may first start during pregnancy and has been reported to increase at this time. It has been estimated that about one third of pregnant women are affected by domestic violence.

*The safety of the woman, her children and unborn child are paramount.*