



THE
SURVIVORS
TRUST



brook

#CHECKWITH
ME FIRST

Tips for young people

A guide for survivors of sexual
abuse, assault and trauma



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The Survivors Trust and Brook are collaborating as part of the **#CheckWithMeFirst project** to help raise awareness of the challenges that young people who are survivors of sexual abuse, assault and trauma may face when accessing healthcare appointments and screening services.



1 in 4 girls and women*

1 in 6 men and boys*

experience sexual violence or abuse at some time in their life



You are not alone

If you find healthcare appointments difficult, you are not alone. Many people get anxious about attending healthcare appointments, such as sexual health screening, or visiting their GP or dentist. For survivors of sexual abuse, assault or other traumatic experiences, these appointments may be particularly difficult and can sometimes trigger unwanted thoughts and memories.

Trauma can affect us in many ways and can have long-lasting impact, both physically and emotionally. Physical check-ups, examinations, and medical appointments may be triggering, so the tips in this guide are designed to support you to access the care you need.

If you would prefer this guide in a different format, please contact nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org.

*The above statistics refer to girls/women and boys/men. This is because there's a lack of data about trans and non-binary survivors of sexual violence, but everyone deserves help, support and understanding regardless of their sexuality or gender.





Remember:

You have control over your body. You deserve to be treated with respect and supported to make your own decisions about the healthcare you receive. Consent applies to healthcare professionals, and any touching or examination requires your permission. This is your right.

Why might I want to get tested?

We would recommend getting tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) if you have had unprotected sex, especially if it is with a new partner. Some STIs do not have any symptoms, so it is a good idea to get checked even if nothing seems out of the ordinary.

Test for STIs at home

If attending healthcare appointments is difficult for you, you might find it easier to get a free STI testing kit which you can use in the privacy of your own home. Each STI kit will be different as it will depend on what is available in your area. Some may only provide Chlamydia testing, whilst others may offer Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, HIV and Syphilis tests.

[Click here](#) to visit Brook's website for more information on home STI test kits, including how you can order one.

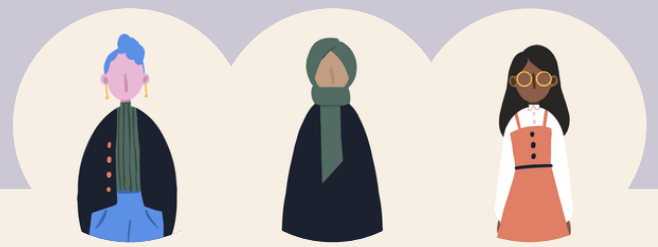
[Click here](#) to visit Brook's online STIs journey tool, which includes useful information and signposting to helpful support services.



Who should I go to if I have been sexually assaulted?

If you have been sexually assaulted, you are not alone. Here are some sources of support that you might want to consider getting in touch with:

- **Sexual Assault Referral Centres (SARCs)** are specialist medical and forensic services for anyone who has been recently sexually assaulted. They are designed to be as comfortable as possible. SARCs have specialist staff who are trained to help you make informed decisions about what you want to do next. You can find the closest SARC to you by searching for your location on the NHS website.
- **Independent Sexual Violence Advisors (ISVAs)** can provide you with a range of specialist support, depending on your individual needs. You can find more information on The Survivors Trust website by clicking here.
- **The Survivors Trust Helpline and Live Chat** services are available for anyone over the age of 16 who has been affected by sexual violence or sexual abuse. Specially trained helpline workers are there to listen and support you. Click here for the opening hours for both services.
- **The Survivors Trust Resources Site** offers information, resources and self-help tools to help anyone who has been affected by sexual violence or abuse navigate their journey of healing. Click here to visit the site.



Before your appointment

You might be...	Did you know...?	You could say...
<p>Feeling worried about having to rush through an appointment.</p> <p>Worried that you need more time.</p>	<p>When booking your appointment, you can request a double appointment of two back-to-back time slots to allow more time if needed.</p> <p>If the service can't offer you more time on a certain date you can reschedule – they should be able to offer it.</p>	<p>“Appointments like this are triggering/difficult for me, could I have a double appointment for more time?”</p> <p>“I know I will need more time to go ahead with this type of examination, when could you offer me a double appointment?”</p>
<p>Unsure whether to disclose any feelings you have, including discomfort.</p>	<p>If you feel comfortable you could share your experiences or why this is difficult with the healthcare professional.</p>	<p>“I have experienced sexual assault/something in the past which makes these appointments difficult for me, I need that to be taken into consideration during my appointment.”</p>
<p>Worried you will forget what you need to say or ask during the appointment</p>	<p>It is normal to forget things once you get into the room, especially if you are feeling stressed or anxious.</p> <p>Preparing some questions or things to say and ask beforehand, and writing them down to either show the healthcare professional or refer to, can help.</p>	<p>“I have prepared some questions, can I read them/show them to you so you can answer them?”</p>



Before your appointment

You might be...	Did you know...?	You could say...
<p>Feeling uncomfortable about being alone with a medical professional.</p> <p>Feeling uncomfortable about an examination being carried out by a healthcare professional of a certain gender.</p>	<p>Healthcare professionals should offer you the option of having a chaperone present for any examination. This applies whether you are the same as gender your health professional or not.</p> <p>You can sometimes bring someone along with you, though if this is not possible, they should provide you with a chaperone.</p> <p>It is your right to have someone else be in the room.</p> <p>You can request to book an appointment with a medical professional of the same or different gender to yourself.</p>	<p>"May I bring someone with me as a chaperone? If not, would you be able to provide one?"</p> <p>"I would like a chaperone present who is female/male."</p> <p>"I would not like to be examined by someone who is a different gender to myself."</p>
<p>Feeling too anxious to attend your appointment.</p>	<p>Most healthcare services will be able to speak with you before your appointment so that you know exactly what to expect.</p> <p>You could ask if you are able to speak to the health professional via telephone and ask them to talk you through what is going to happen during the appointment.</p> <p>If you don't feel up to it you always have the right to reschedule.</p>	<p>"Appointments like this make me particularly anxious, is it possible to speak to the health professional before to talk things through?"</p> <p>"I am unable to attend today, I need to reschedule this appointment."</p>



During your appointment

You might be...	Did you know...?	You could say...
<p>Feeling uncomfortable during an appointment.</p> <p>Wanting to stop the appointment.</p>	<p>You always have the right to stop or leave an appointment at any point.</p> <p>You do not need to be polite or explain yourself. Make yourself safe and do not continue if it doesn't feel right.</p>	<p>"This is too uncomfortable. I do not want to continue."</p> <p>"I no longer consent to this examination."</p> <p>"I am ending this appointment now."</p> <p>"I need you to stop."</p>
<p>Confused about the appointment or worried something will happen without you being prepared.</p>	<p>You have the right to know and understand what is going to take place during an examination or any sort of procedure.</p> <p>You also have the right to ask for more time to decide whether you want to go ahead with something or not- you can always reschedule for a later date.</p> <p>You can ask the healthcare professional to let you know what they're doing or about to do at every point and tell them to ask you for consent each time.</p>	<p>"I need time to think about that before we go ahead with the examination."</p> <p>"Thank you for explaining, I don't want to proceed right now."</p> <p>"It will support me if you let me know what is about to happen at each point, and ask my permission before going ahead at each step of the examination."</p> <p>"I'd like to feel prepared about what is going to happen, can you explain it step-by-step for me now?"</p>



During your appointment

You might be...	Did you know...?	You could say...
<p>Worried you will freeze if something doesn't feel right.</p> <p>Aware that when you are anxious you find it hard to speak up and say 'stop'.</p>	<p>A freeze response is nothing to be ashamed of, it is a normal way the body works to try to keep us safe.</p> <p>There are different ways you can signal 'stop' without having to verbally say it. A signal such as putting your hand up or agreeing a different method of non-verbal communication with your healthcare professional might help you feel more comfortable.</p>	<p>"I'm aware I could freeze and find it too hard to ask you verbally to stop, could we come up with a signal such as raising my hand to stop?"</p> <p>"Can we agree a non-verbal signal that I can use if I need you to stop?"</p> <p>"I am worried I might find it hard to ask you to stop if I get anxious, could you make sure to check in with me regularly, and if I don't respond to you please stop."</p>
<p>Feeling uncomfortable with someone else touching or examining you.</p>	<p>There are some parts of examinations such as taking swabs which are sometimes possible for you to do yourself, if you would prefer to do so.</p> <p>If your health professional needs to look more closely at parts of your body which could include touching or moving a part of your body, this is something you may be able to do yourself.</p> <p>If you feel triggered or distressed by the examination, you can ask the healthcare professional to stop at any time.</p>	<p>"Is there any part of this examination I can do myself?"</p> <p>"Is it possible for me to do any of these swabs myself?"</p>
<p>Feeling uncomfortable about language used by the healthcare professional.</p>	<p>If you know that you find particular words or phrases distressing or triggering, you can let the healthcare professional know about this. It might be easier to write them down. This will help the professional to use alternative language that will be less difficult for you.</p>	<p>"I would prefer you not to say '...'. Please could you say '...' instead?"</p> <p>"The word '...' makes me feel uncomfortable."</p>



After an appointment

You might be...	Did you know...?	Helpful tips...
Feeling sensitive and needing time to process the experience.	<p>All of your feelings about an examination or appointment are valid. It could be triggering, upsetting or you may have not many feelings about it at all.</p> <p>Remember to be kind to yourself. Your trauma responses are completely normal and are not your fault.</p> <p><u>The Survivors Trust Resources Site</u> offers information and practical tips to help survivors manage anxiety, panic, dissociation, and more.</p>	<p>Make time and space to look after yourself if possible.</p> <p>Make an aftercare plan for yourself (you can prepare this before you go!) and carry it out. Your plan should involve doing something which will help you to relax and reconnect with your body in a way that works best for you.</p> <p>Here are some suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eat or drink something comforting • Wrap yourself up in a warm blanket • Call a trusted person to catch up or talk about your feelings • Go for a walk • Practice some gentle yoga • Dance to loud music • Have a warm bath.
Be unhappy or uncomfortable with something that happened during the appointment but didn't feel able to say anything at the time	<p>You are always within your rights to complain or give feedback after a healthcare appointment. It is also normal to find it difficult to do this in the moment so don't worry if you didn't say something there and then.</p> <p>You may also not want to communicate this directly to the service but just need to be heard by someone. If you would like support following your appointment you can call The Survivors Trust's free, confidential helpline (0808 801 0818).</p>	Write a letter or email to the service to give your feedback. It is important that services take on this feedback to be more trauma-informed for future people coming for appointments.

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Tips to ease anxiety before and during your appointment

- Grounding techniques such as relaxation and breathing exercises may help you to feel less anxious. **Click here** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst guide on grounding techniques. You can practice these before your appointment to find out what works best for you.
- Take something into the room with you that feels or smells comforting. Smells can be soothing and help us to relax. Try putting your favourite scent onto a scarf or cosy jumper which you can wrap or tuck close to your face to create your own little safety bubble.
- You may find it helpful to listen to music, an audiobook or a podcast to help you feel more relaxed – feel free to take headphones along with you to do so.
- Wear clothes that you feel comfortable in. If you wear skirts, you might want to consider wearing a long, loose skirt to the appointment or screening if it is likely that a professional will ask to examine you underneath. This will allow you to leave your skirt on, which may help you to feel more comfortable.
- Remember, there is no expectation for you to go through with anything your appointment. **It is okay to try again at a later date or decide that it is not something you are able to do.** Your healthcare practitioner will be able to talk you through your risks and options and help you decide the best course of action for you.
- You could prepare a document with prompts of what to say or what you need your healthcare professional to know. This can help with any nerves or difficulty remembering once you are in the room, or you can just pass them the paper so they can read it easily themselves. (We've supplied a template on the next page).





These words could be triggering for me, please do not use them:
(e.g. stay still, just relax)

This is a signal I would like to use a non-verbal way to communicate for you to stop:
(e.g. raising my hand, tapping my leg)

I have questions about...

I need you to know...



Useful links and contacts

Brook

National charity offering both clinical sexual health services and education and wellbeing services for young people.

[Click here to visit the Brook website](http://www.brook.org.uk) (www.brook.org.uk)

[Click here to visit Brook's online STIs journey signposting tool](#)

[Click here to visit Brook's webpage on STI testing kits](#)

The Survivors Trust

Membership organisation representing over 120 specialist support services for survivors of rape, sexual abuse, and sexual violence in the UK.

[Click here to visit The Survivors Trust website](http://www.thesurvivorstrust.org) (www.thesurvivorstrust.org)

Helpline: 08088 010818 (For survivors, professionals, family and supporters)

Email: **info@thesurvivorstrust.org**

#CheckWithMeFirst

- **[Click here](#)** to view our #CheckWithMeFirst animation
- **[Click here](#)** to download the #CheckWithMeFirst Grounding Techniques resource from The Survivors Trust website
- **[Click here](#)** to download a template you can take with you to your screening or healthcare appointment



#CheckWithMeFirst Project

The Survivors Trust has been commissioned by NHS London to run an awareness project which will provide healthcare professionals with resources for treating potential survivors of sexual abuse, giving them the tools and knowledge to confidently engage with and best support these patients and people under their care. [Click here to find out more.](#)

Get in touch with us via email –
nhs.checkwithmefirst@thesurvivorstrust.org



If you would prefer this guide in an alternative format, please contact us.