

The following information is a mixture of resource provided to MOD by NHS England & Improvement (from a recent awareness campaign) and materials on SARCs available online.

### Sexual Assault Referral Services (SARCs)

Sexual assault and abuse can happen to anyone; men, women, and children; at any age, and may be a one-off event or happen repeatedly, however, some individuals are more at risk of experiencing sexual assault and abuse throughout their lifetime. In some cases, abuse can involve the use of technology, such as the internet or social media, which may be associated with sexual grooming, online sexual harassment, and trolling.

Dedicated care is available for the victims and survivors of sexual assault and abuse in the form of sexual assault referral centres (SARCs). These services are commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement and Police and Crime Commissioners. SARCs provide specialist medical and forensic services for **anyone** (adults and children) who has been raped or sexually assaulted or abused (regardless of when the incident happened) and provide non-judgmental advice in a safe environment.

**You can go to a SARC without talking to the police or a doctor.** The best way to do this is usually to phone them. SARCs are designed to be as private and comfortable for you as possible with specifically trained staff. A support worker, nurse or doctor will talk to you about what has happened and give you information. They can also support you through how you are feeling. You can also choose to have a forensic medical examination (where a trained doctor or nurse will take swabs of anywhere you have been touched and will take photos of any injuries – both these can be used as evidence if you decide to make a report to the police).

**You can have a medical examination whether or not you think you will report to the police.** Some people who have a forensic medical examination don't go on to report to the police. No-one should make you feel any pressure to report or not – that decision should be totally up to you. The doctor/nurse will explain the process before and during the examination and a shower and change of clothes is offered after the examination.

Some SARCs might help you get access to an [ISVA](#), further emotional support, or counselling. You can also [contact your local Rape Crisis Centre](#) directly if you want more support.

Attendance at SARCs, generally, is reportedly low and this demonstrates a missed opportunity for many victims to receive early access to support following a sexual offence (support may include timely access to or onward referral to specialist sexual violence services – third sector groups and Independent Sexual Violence Advisors – or other mental health support).

The NHS is keen that SARCs can be viewed as: *the 'front door' to receiving the right support, first time, and to challenge the prevailing assumption that access to services must come via police or requires the intention to proceed with a criminal investigation, which may act as barriers to access statutory services for some.*

### Key Considerations

- Services are available across the country, 24-7, to anyone who has experienced sexual assault or abuse, regardless of when the incident occurred.
- Adults can access a SARC without notifying police (self-referral) and have the right to choose whether to involve police or pursue a criminal justice outcome – (involving the police or justice system is not a requirement to receive the full SARC service offer and if there is a legal/safeguarding reason why this right to choose cannot be exercised, this will be communicated as early as possible).
- Everything that happens at the SARC is private and confidential. This means they won't tell anyone else about what has happened without your consent (unless a child or vulnerable adult is in danger).

- SARCs are staffed by health and wellbeing professionals who will support the physical and emotional wellbeing of victims.
- Information about SARCs is available on [nhs.uk](https://www.nhs.uk) and there is also an [online local service finder](#).

### Highlighting and overcoming barriers

The NHS want to see greater use of SARC services and have conducted their own awareness raising campaigns to try and spread the word that professional, confidential, and compassionate support is available. A lower take up of services may be due to general lack of awareness and may also be influenced by specific barriers. Further reading on some potential barriers is detailed below.

- To date, there is no official brand name for SARCs services and research has highlighted awareness of SARCs is poor amongst the general population. SARCs may use an alternative name, such as 'Topaz' or 'Beech House', in order to increase discretion as to what they are and also to be more welcoming. A positive from this approach is that SARCs use these alternate names on marketing materials, such as wallet size cards, so that clients can keep contact information that does not explicitly explain the nature of the services in their personal belongings. However, it may also be confusing for people as the naming convention is not particularly consistent. **The NHS or other sites like rapecrisis.org can help you understand what local services are available.**
- Referral data for SARCs demonstrates that the police continue to be the primary referrer into SARC services and self-referral remains low – around 16.5%. **The NHS hopes that, by increasing awareness that these services exist, referrals will increase, and more support can be given to survivors.**
- Anecdotal evidence shows that SARCs can be perceived as female-only services, and some literature and feedback indicate that males may experience more barriers to attending services following a sexual assault than women. These barriers may result in men not coming forward for many years after the event. **SARCs can be attended by men, women, and children, and there are also charities and helplines for men to call if they want to speak to someone.**
- Data released to the NHS by MOJ in a benchmarking exercise has indicated that, on average, prevalence of sexual violence across the LGBT population was slightly higher than the general population. An LGBT survivor may be reluctant to come forward because for fear of any stigma or through not knowing what services they can access. **All SARCs are confidential, and for anyone who wants to discuss further, the Survivors Trust offers practical advice and guidance for LGBT+ survivors.**
- The Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) reports higher percentages of female than male survivors of sexual assault and abuse and indicates that there may be an elevated risk of sexual assault and abuse in Black, Mixed Race, and minority ethnic communities. Cultural factors such as the concept that black women should be 'stronger', or a distrust of authorities may also act as barriers to accessing services. However, it should be remembered that **all SARC services are confidential when accessed, that professional support is there for anyone who needs it, and that engagement with the police is absolutely voluntary.**
- During the 'National lockdowns' of 2020 it was highlighted that people were unsure whether they would still be able to access a SARC. Unless specifically advised otherwise, **if further lockdown restrictions are put in place, these do not apply when requiring help for sexual assault and abuse / needing to access a SARC.**

Find out more: <https://rapecrisis.org.uk/get-help/>