

Information for Servicemembers about Military Sexual Trauma

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This handout summarizes important information about benefits and services that may be available to Veterans who experienced sexual assault or sexual harassment during their military service. **Please carefully review the information below as a first step.**

What is Military Sexual Trauma (MST)?

Military sexual trauma, or MST, is the term used by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment experienced by a Veteran during his or her military service. Both men and women can experience MST, which involves any sexual activity where a Veteran is involved against his or her will. He or she may have been:

- Pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied better treatment in exchange for sex)
- Unable to consent (such as when asleep or intoxicated) or physically forced into sexual activities

Other experiences of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing, threatening, offensive remarks about a person's body or sexual activities, and threatening and unwelcome sexual advances.

The identity or characteristics of the perpetrator(s), whether a Veteran was on or off duty at the time, or whether a Veteran was on or off base at the time, do not impact whether an experience is MST.

Why am I being provided this information at the Separation Health Assessment exam?

Veterans are incredibly resilient after stressful events during their service, but some struggle with mental or physical health difficulties afterwards, even many years later. VA knows that Veterans who experienced MST may face unique challenges in their recovery. This handout provides information about issues related to filing a VA disability claim for a condition related to MST. The handout also addresses free health care services for conditions related to MST.

Although the goal of this exam is to document any conditions that might be related to your service prior to your discharge, here are some things to know before discussing MST with your examiner:

- What you discuss during the exam will be included in today's report, which becomes part of your Service Treatment Records and may compromise a Restricted Report (see below to learn more).
- Some state laws require that clinicians report sexual assault experiences to civilian authorities.

What should I do if I would like to talk to someone about MST today?

The best option is to call the **Safe Helpline** at **877-995-5247** or visit <https://safehelpline.org/>. They can provide immediate support and connect you with specially trained Department of Defense (DoD) staff.

Depending on the nature of your experiences, you may have several reporting options. For example, if you experienced sexual assault, Safe Helpline staff can tell you more about making a formal report to authorities.

- One option is a **Restricted Report**, which allows you to confidentially disclose the crime to a DoD Sexual Assault Response Coordinator (SARC), DoD Victim Advocate, or certain DoD health care professionals so that you can receive medical treatment and services. In this case, your chain of command will not be notified, and there will be no official investigation. Only SARCs, Victim Advocates, or specific DoD health care staff (not VA staff), can take a Restricted Report.
- Another option is an **Unrestricted Report**. If you want to pursue criminal charges, you must file an Unrestricted Report. Staff at the Safe Helpline can help you decide on your options.

Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) Benefits Related to MST

VBA administers VA's non-health care-related benefits, including disability compensation for a mental or physical health condition that developed or got worse as a result of experiences of MST. If you apply, VBA will need to establish that:

1. You currently have physical or mental health symptoms that are disabling;
2. You had an experience(s) during your military service that had an impact upon your health, and;
3. There is a link between your current symptoms and your military service.

For claims related to most mental or physical health conditions, VBA needs direct evidence that you experienced MST and that your injury or disability began or got worse during your military service. Direct evidence can include copies of DoD investigative reports or forms used to report sexual assault or sexual harassment, can be used to support a disability claim.

For certain claims, such as those for posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) related to MST, VBA developed special policies to assist individuals, because direct evidence can be difficult to obtain. For these claims, VBA also accepts indirect evidence, or "markers", such as evidence of behavior changes around the time of an MST experience. Markers can include:

- Records from police, rape crisis centers, mental health counseling, hospitals, or physicians
- Statements from others such as family members, fellow Servicemembers, clergy, or counselors
- Request for transfer to another military duty assignment or deterioration in work performance
- Pregnancy tests or tests for sexually transmitted diseases around the time the MST occurred
- Episodes of depression, panic attacks, or anxiety
- Difficulties with substance abuse
- Unexplained economic or behavioral changes; increased use of leave without obvious reason
- Increased or decreased use of prescription medications
- Letters shared in confidence, diary or journal entries, emails, text messages, or tweets
- Relationship conflicts, divorce, or increased disregard for military or civilian authority
- Sexual dysfunction

How can I collect this evidence?

VBA has a duty to assist Veterans in collecting evidence to support their disability compensation claims. Many VBA Regional Offices have specifically identified point people (“MST specialists”) that can help with MST-related claims. All Regional Offices also have Women Veterans Coordinators who can assist both male and female Veterans filing claims related to MST.

VBA knows that often it can be difficult for Veterans to locate direct and indirect evidence, particularly if they decide to file a claim many years after their experiences. Because of this, VA encourages Servicemembers to hold onto any materials that might later serve as evidence, such as copies of reports to authorities, copies of treatment records, or anything documenting your difficulties while you were on Active Duty. For example, if you told a friend or family member about your experiences of MST, consider asking him or her to write a brief note stating this, or at least keep a list of people you told. Even if you do not want to file a claim now, this evidence will be useful to you if you later decide to file.

More information is available by calling 1-800-827-1000 or visiting the following website:

<http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/MST.pdf>.

Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Services for Military Sexual Trauma

In VHA, Veterans can receive free treatment for any mental or physical health condition related to MST.

- You **do not** need to have reported your experiences or have any documentation that they occurred to receive this care.
- You **do not** need to have filed for disability compensation with the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).
- Some Veterans can receive this free MST-related care even if they are not eligible for other VA health care services. For example, length of Active Duty service does not affect eligibility for MST-related treatment through VHA.

Free outpatient MST-related treatment is available at every VA health care facility. VHA also has residential and inpatient mental health programs for Veterans who need more intense treatment and support. VHA’s treatment services are designed to meet Veterans where they are at in their recovery, whether that is focusing on strategies for coping with challenging emotions and memories or, for Veterans who are ready, talking about their MST experiences with a counselor.

How can I access VHA’s treatment services related to MST once I am fully separated?

You can contact your nearest VA Medical Center and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator, a point person who can help you access VHA services and may know of additional resources. You can also contact your local Vet Center. You can find a list of facilities and contact information at www.va.gov and www.vetcenter.va.gov. More information is also available at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp or by calling 1-800-827-1000.

Thank you for your service to our country.