

The Medical Exam in Child Sexual Abuse Cases: What Multidisciplinary Team Members Need to Know



This fact sheet and accompanying video outlines the importance of a medical exam for child sexual abuse victims, including how the exam is conducted and why it should be performed by a medical provider with specialized training.

Why A Medical Exam is Important for Victims of Child Sexual Abuse

CACs/MDTs can share with families and partner agencies, the importance of why a medical exam is important:

- To ensure the health and well-being of the child
- To reassure the child that everything is ok with their body
- To diagnose and treat medical conditions that may be related to sexual abuse
- To document any possible physical and forensic findings
- To allow for collection of evidence that may be present on the child's body or clothing within 72 hours for pre-pubescent children, or 120 hours for adolescents

When Should Exams be Conducted

Urgent exams are necessary:

- Medical, psychological or safety concerns such as acute pain or bleeding, suicidal ideation, or suspected human trafficking
- Alleged assault that may have occurred within the previous 72 hours (for pre pubescent children) or 120 hours (for adolescents) necessitating collection of trace evidence for later forensic analysis
- Need for emergency contraception
- Need for post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) for STIs including HIV

Non-urgent exams are necessary:

- When there is a disclosure by child of abuse that occurred more than 72/120 hours ago
- Children who are exhibiting sexualized behaviors
- Cases where sexual abuse is suspected by MDT, or family, including abuse of siblings

Note: Children in non-urgent cases do not need to visit the Emergency Department after hours (or even during business hours) if the abuse did not recently occur. It is preferable to schedule an appointment with a specialist at the CAC, at a Child Abuse Program at a hospital or with a medical provider that has a linkage agreement with the CAC.

What Happens During a Medical Exam

- It is a head to toe exam, similar to the pediatrician visit, with the addition of looking at the genital areas
- The medical exam is not painful or invasive and a speculum is not used on a pre-pubescent child
- A parent/guardian is allowed to be with the child during the medical exam
- Lab tests can be conducted and prescriptions can be written, if necessary
- A full Interview of the child is not conducted
- DO NO HARM policy means a child is never forced to have an exam

Why a Medical Exam Should be Scheduled in All Cases of Child Sexual Abuse

- We know that a child's disclosure is a process and they may not be telling all details in the initial disclosure
- To ensure the health and well-being of the child
- To reassure the child that everything is okay with their body
- This may be the only trip to the doctor for some children with limited access to medical care, connection back to primary care physician

Who Should Conduct Medical Exams*

- Pediatricians with specialty board designation as a Child Abuse Board Pediatrician
- Other advanced practice providers such as physicians, physician assistants or nurse practitioners with a minimum of 16 hours of formal didactic training in the medical evaluation of child sexual abuse
- Non-advanced practice nurses (RN's) with a minimum of 40 hours of training in the evaluation of child sexual abuse

*National Children's Alliance, Standards for Accreditation, 2017

What should Parents tell their Children about a Medical Exam

Parents should tell their children that a doctor/nurse will be doing an exam, to make sure their body is healthy and this will include looking at the private parts/parts of the body that go to the bathroom. They should be told there will not be any shots during the exam, and it will not be painful.

Why Normal is Normal

- Over 90% of medical exams are "normal" (*Kellogg et al 2004*)
- A normal exam does not mean sexual abuse didn't happen
- A normal exam does not mean the child is lying
- A normal exam does not mean you can't proceed with criminal charges or child protection findings
- Not all types of sexual abuse are expected to cause injury, minor injuries heal quickly and children don't always report immediately and genital tissues are "stretchy" (similar to the inside of your mouth, which heals quickly)
- Expert witnesses (child abuse pediatricians and nurse practitioners/SANE P) may be used in court to explain to a jury why there is usually no medical findings in child sexual abuse cases

For more information and to view the accompanying video, visit: www.nrcac.org/resources/medical-resources/



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