



THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF
OBSTETRICIANS AND GYNECOLOGISTS

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Sexual Assault Screening Should Be Routine

Washington, DC -- Health care providers should routinely screen all patients for a history of sexual assault, according to a Committee Opinion issued today by The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (The College). More than 300,000 women are sexually assaulted each year in the US, but this number likely underestimates the prevalence of sexual assault as it is one of the least reported violent crimes.

The term sexual assault covers a range of unwanted or forced sexual activity, from inappropriate touching to rape. Many women are not upfront about their experiences with sexual assault due to stigma associated with the crime and/or fear of retaliation if they report it. Most often, women know the person assaulting them.

"When ob-gyns routinely screen patients for a history of sexual assault, women who have been or are currently being assaulted may be more likely to report their abuse," said Veronica Gillispie, MD, a member of The College's Committee on Health Care for Underserved Women who helped develop the Committee Opinion. "There is a long list of physical and emotional health problems that follow a history of abuse. By identifying victims of sexual assault and encouraging them to report their abuse, these problems can be better addressed and even prevented."

Sexually assaulted women are at risk for unintended pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and physical injuries ranging from scratches, bruises, and welts to broken bones, bullet wounds, and even death. Sexual assault is also associated with mental health conditions, such as post traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse and dependence.

The College emphasizes that emergency contraception and preventive measures for STDs should be available and provided to women who have been sexually assaulted. In addition, physicians examining these women have a responsibility to be familiar with forensic examination procedures and state and local policy requirements for gathering evidence of assault.

"Ob-gyns can be instrumental in stopping the cycle of abuse," Dr. Gillispie said. "Providers should understand their role in treating patients with a history of sexual assault and how important they can be in helping these women heal."

Committee Opinion #499 "Sexual Assault" is published in the August 2011 issue of *Obstetrics & Gynecology*.

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The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (The College), a 501(c)(3) organization, is the nation's leading group of physicians providing health care for women. As a private, voluntary, nonprofit membership organization of approximately 55,000 members, The College strongly advocates for quality health care for women, maintains the highest standards of clinical practice and continuing education of its members, promotes patient education, and increases awareness among its members and the public of the changing issues facing women's health care. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), a 501(c)(6) organization, is its companion organization. Follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/acognews and at www.acog.org.