

Sexual Violence in Health Care

Sexual violence in a medical setting is any non-consensual sexual act, harassment, or exploitation that happens while receiving medical care. This includes:¹

- Unnecessary genital examination.
- Kissing, touching, or other sexual actions without the patient's consent.
- Asking inappropriate sexual questions unrelated to medical care.
- Jokes, gestures, or comments that are sexually suggestive, demeaning, or disrespectful to the patient.

When doctors, nurses, or other medical professionals commit sexual misconduct, they are abusing their power and violating patients' trust.²

Prevalence

- A 2023 study on sexual violence in healthcare settings found:³
 - **8.96%** of patients reported experiencing sexual violence perpetrated by a healthcare professional.
 - **Vulnerable populations** (including individuals with cognitive disabilities and mental illnesses) were at an increased risk of experiencing sexual misconduct in medical settings.
 - **Patients in outpatient settings** were at higher risk of experiencing sexual violence while receiving medical care because medical professionals were often unsupervised when interacting with the patients.
 - A prior report that analyzed 15 years of information from the National Practitioner Data Bank found that nearly **83%** of incidents happen in outpatient settings.⁴
- A 2024 study of board-certified physicians found that **over half** of the reported sexual misconduct cases involved Family Medicine, OB/GYN, or Psychiatry.⁵
 - **1 in 5** cases involved vulnerable patients, like minors or people with cognitive disabilities.
 - Nearly **90%** of the victims of physician sexual misconduct are women.
 - **1 in 3** cases involved grooming behaviors, like boundary crossing or inappropriate attention or physical contact.
- A 2023 study on sexual abuse in healthcare revealed high rates of sexual assault among individuals receiving mental health care:⁶
 - **45%** of psychiatric inpatients reported experiencing sexual violence during their stay. In most situations, the assaults were perpetrated by other patients.
 - An examination of Veterans Affairs' health facilities, included in the study, found that of 284 reported sexual assaults, **89** were patient-on-patient, **85** were patient-on-employee, and **46** were employee-on-patient.

¹ The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG). (2020). "Sexual Misconduct." Retrieved March 17, 2025, from <https://www.acog.org/clinical/clinical-guidance/committee-opinion/articles/2020/01/sexual-misconduct>

² Ibid.

³ Favero, M., Gomes, V., Del Campo, A., Moreira, D., & Sousa-Gomes, V. (2023). "Sexual Violence Perpetrated by Health Professionals." *Frontiers in Psychology*. Retrieved March 17, 2025, from <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1005696/full>

⁴ Public Health Citizen's Health Research Group. (2020). "15-Year Summary of Sexual Misconduct by U.S. Physicians Reported to the National Practitioner Data Bank, 2003 – 2017: In-Depth, Updated Evidence on White Coat Betrayal." Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://www.citizen.org/wp-content/uploads/2523.pdf>

⁵ Baxley, E., Donahue, S., Koempel, A., Anderson, A., Hansen, B., LeRoy, G., Magill, M. (2024). "Sexual Misconduct by Board Certified Family Physicians." *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39455261>

⁶ Betterly, H., Musselman, M., Sorrentino, R. (2023). "Sexual Assault in the Inpatient Psychiatric Setting." *General Hospital Psychiatry*. Retrieved July 21, 2025, from <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0163834323000270#s0020>

- A 2019 study examining sexual misconduct in healthcare found that **97%** of offenders engaged in repeated misconduct and **99%** admitted their actions were intentional.⁷
- A study analyzing disciplinary actions from 2016 - 2022 revealed that **8%** of physicians admitted to sexual misconduct with patients.⁸
 - Some physicians who admitted to sexual contact with patients used their medical authority - such as writing prescriptions - to take advantage of them.

Outcomes

- A 2022 study examining patients' understanding and response to sexual misconduct in health care found that **90%** of patients said they were never told what sexual misconduct looks like in a medical setting, with fewer than **1 in 10** patients who experienced abuse reporting it.⁹
 - Many didn't report it because they were afraid, unsure of how to report, or didn't know if it was misconduct.
 - A 2017 analysis of sexual misconduct cases committed by doctors revealed serious gaps in accountability.¹⁰
- While **87%** of doctors accused of sexual misconduct lost or gave up their licenses, **74%** were later permitted to return to practice.
 - Only **11** U.S. states require medical boards to report sexual abuse by doctors to law enforcement.
 - **96%** of cases involved repeated abuse.
- A 2022 study of sexual misconduct among doctors in the U.S. revealed a troubling lack of accountability.¹¹
 - **81%** of sexual misconduct cases by doctors were closed with no formal action taken.
 - Only **2%** led to official discipline.
 - Sanctions were often private, meaning patients had no way of knowing whether the doctor had been disciplined.

⁷ Burgart, A. M. (2019). "Physician Sexual Assault: The Moral Imperative for Gender Equity in Medicine." *The American Journal of Bioethics*. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15265161.2018.1552036>

⁸ Baxley, E., Donahue, S., Koempel, A., Anderson, A., Hansen, B., LeRoy, G., Magill, M. (2024). "Sexual Misconduct by Board Certified Family Physicians." *Journal of the American Board of Family Medicine*. Retrieved March 13, 2025, from <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39455261>

⁹ McIntosh, T., Walsh, H., Parsons, M., Solomon, E. D., Mozersky, J., & DuBois, J. M. (2022). "Responding to Sexual Abuse in Health Care: Development of a Guide for Patients." *Journal of Patient-Centered Research and Reviews*. Retrieved March 11, 2025, from <https://institutionalrepository.aah.org/jpcrr/vol9/iss2/4/>

¹⁰ DuBois, J. M., Walsh, H. A., Chibnall, J. T., Anderson, E. E., Eggers, M. R., Fowose, M., & Ziobrowski, H. (2019). "Sexual Violation of Patients by Physicians: A Mixed-Methods, Exploratory Analysis of 101 Cases." *Sexual abuse: a journal of research and treatment*, 31(5), 503–523. Retrieved May 6, 2025 from <https://doi.org/10.1177/1079063217712217>

¹¹ Burgart, A. M. (2019). "Physician Sexual Assault: The Moral Imperative for Gender Equity in Medicine." *The American Journal of Bioethics*. Retrieved March 18, 2025, from <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/15265161.2018.1552036>