

**“You may feel
like a victim, but
you’re a survivor.”**

-Advice from a woman Veteran

LOCAL RESOURCES

Please attach label with local MST
Coordinator contact information here.

SEXUAL HEALTH AFTER MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

A Guide for Women Veterans

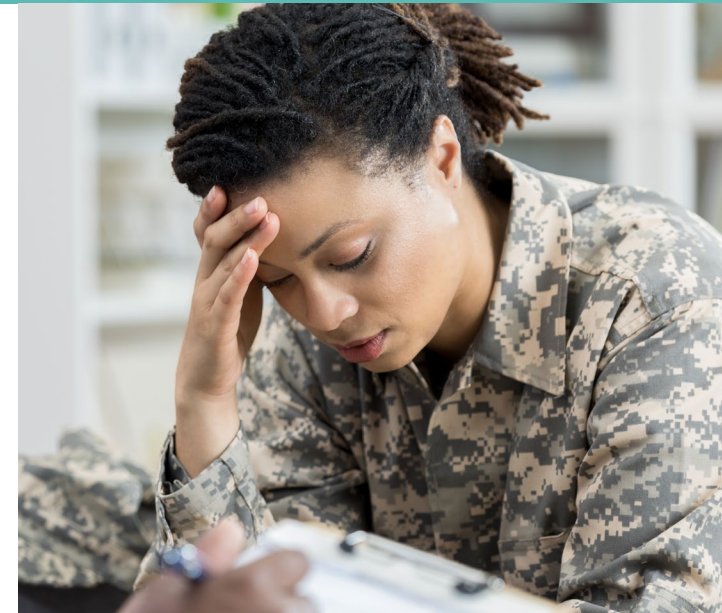
WHAT IS SEXUAL HEALTH?

Sexual health is a state of physical, mental and social well-being in sexuality. It involves positive and respectful approaches to sexuality and relationships. It includes pleasant and safe sexual practices. Healthy sex is not forced or violent. All people have a right to healthy sexuality (*adapted from the World Health Organization, 2018*).

RESOURCES

- VA MST website at www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp
- Videos of women Veterans discussing MST at www.maketheconnection.net. Select “Conditions” and then choose “Effects of Military Sexual Trauma”
- VA Center for Women Veterans website at www.va.gov/womenvet/
- Society for Sexual Medicine Q&A at <https://www.issm.info/sexual-health-ga/>
- Pandora’s Project at <https://pandys.org/>
- *The Sexual Healing Journey: A Guide for Survivors of Sexual Abuse*, 3rd Ed. by Maltz
- *Healing Sex: A Mind-Body Approach to Healing Sexual Trauma* by Haines
- *Becoming Orgasmic: A Sexual and Personal Growth Program for Women* by Heiman & LoPiccolo

This work was supported by the VA South Central Mental Illness Research, Education and Clinical Center (MIRECC) and the VISN 17 Center of Excellence. It is also supported by the clinical expertise of Drs. Amy Silberbogen and Melissa Ming Foynes.



**You deserve to have
a healthy and happy
sexual life**



Choose VA



MILITARY SEXUAL TRAUMA (MST)

MST is sexual assault or harassment that occurs while you are in the military. It can happen at any time or place. You can be on or off duty. You can be on or off the base. Anyone can be an offender. Military personnel, civilians, healthcare providers, or chaplains can be offenders. A current or former spouse can also be an offender.

VA is committed to helping Veterans recover from MST.

MST AND SEXUAL PROBLEMS

Sexual problems are:

- Experienced by 12-32% of women Veterans.
- More common among women Veterans who have experienced MST than those who have not. This may be due to remarks made about the body or unwanted sexual contact during MST.
- More common among women Veterans with other mental health concerns, like depression or PTSD.

GETTING HELP

VA offers free and confidential services to Veterans for MST. This includes counseling and treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST. Sexual problems may be included in this free care.

Ask your VA healthcare provider for help if you have sexual problems. You can ask even if you are not sure if the problems were caused or made worse by MST.

You could say:

- “I am concerned about my sexual health.”
- “I’m having problems with sexual intimacy.”
- “I never want to have sex. It’s causing problems in my relationship.”
- “I feel pain during sex.”

WOMEN’S SEXUAL PROBLEMS

DESIRE: Feeling low sexual desire or less interest in sex than before

AROUSAL: Having physical (feeling “wet”) or mental (feeling “turned-on” or “ready”) problems with sexual arousal

ORGASM: Cannot have an orgasm or getting less pleasure from orgasm

PAIN: Feeling pain in the vagina or pelvis when having sex

SATISFACTION: Being happy with one’s sexual life

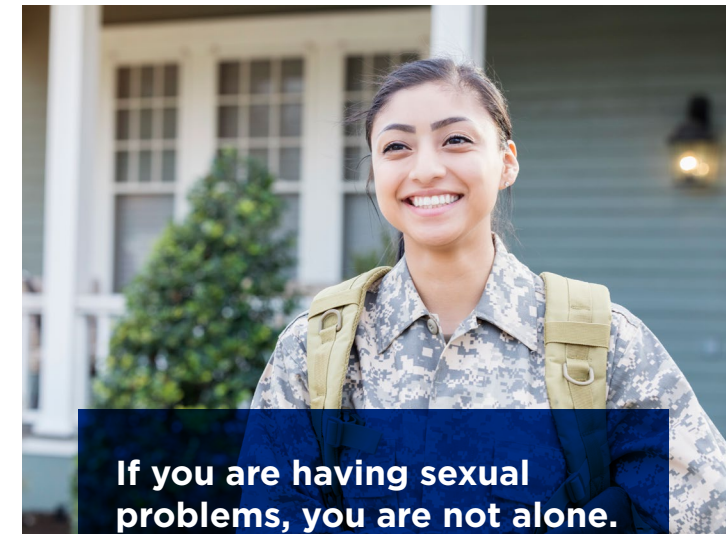
Other common problems include:

- Vaginal injury (such as tearing or bruising)
- Pelvic pain
- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)
- Urinary tract infections
- Problems urinating or controlling urination
- Irregular periods
- Early or difficult menopause

EFFECTS OF MST ON SEXUAL HEALTH

- Having changes in sexual behavior, attitudes, or preferences
- Having more or less sex than before
- Having changes in desire for different types of sexual activities or attraction to different types of people
- Feeling emotionally and physically distant from romantic partners
- Feeling different about or disconnected from one’s body
- Feeling distracted during sex
- Having memories or images of unwanted sexual experiences during sex
- Being unable to say “no” or express sexual needs
- Having sex only after drinking or using substances
- Having feelings of guilt, shame, helplessness, or lack of control when thinking of sex

All of these changes are common reactions to MST. RECOVERY IS POSSIBLE.



If you are having sexual problems, you are not alone. Many women Veterans report these problems. They benefit from treatment.