

Women's Personal Safety

The chance that you or a member of your family will be a victim of violent crime is low. Violent crimes are still comparatively rare and account for a very small part of recorded crime. But some people are still frightened that they, or someone close to them, will be the victim of a violent attack

The best way to cut the risk of attack is by taking sensible precautions. Most people already do this as part of their everyday lives, often without realizing it.

How can you stay safe?

Staying safe at home

- Make sure your house or flat is secure. Always secure outside doors. Fit barrel locks top and bottom. If you have to use a key, keep it in a safe place away from the door where you can find it quickly in an emergency – you may need to use the door in the event of fire.
- If other people such as previous tenants could still have keys that fit, change the locks. Don't give keys to workmen or tradesmen, as they can easily make copies.
- If you wake to hear the sound of an intruder, only you can decide how best to handle the situation. You may want to lie quietly to avoid attracting attention to yourself, in the hope that they will leave. Or you may feel more confident if you switch on the lights and make a lot of noise by moving about. Even if you're on your own, call out loudly to an imaginary companion – most burglars will flee empty-handed rather than risking a confrontation. Ring the police as soon as it's safe for you to do so. A telephone extension in your bedroom will make you feel more secure as it allows you to call the police immediately, without alerting the intruder.
- Draw your curtains after dark and if you think there is a prowler outside – dial 999
- Use only your surname and initials in the telephone directory and on the doorplate. That way a stranger won't know if a man or a woman lives there.
- If you see signs of a break-in at your home, like a smashed window or open door, don't go in. Go to a neighbor and call the police.
- If you are selling your home, don't show people around on your own. Ask your estate agent to send a representative with anyone who wants to view your house.
- When you answer the phone, simply say 'hello'; don't give your number. If the caller claims to have a wrong number, ask him or her to repeat the number required. Never reveal any information about yourself to a stranger and never say you are alone in the house.
- If you receive an abusive or threatening phone call, put the receiver down beside the phone, and walk away. Come back a few minutes later and replace the receiver; don't listen to see if the caller is still there. Don't say anything – an emotional reaction is just what the caller wants. This allows the caller to say what he or she wants to say, without causing distress to you. If the calls continue, tell the police and the operator and keep a record of the date, time and content of each phone call. This may help the authorities trace the caller.

Staying safe when you're out and about

- If you often walk home in the dark, get a personal attack alarm from a DIY store or ask your local crime prevention officer where you can buy one. Carry it in your hand so you can use it immediately to scare off an attacker. Make sure it is designed to continue sounding if it's dropped or falls to the ground.
- Carry your bag close to you with the clasp facing inwards. Carry your house keys in your pocket. If someone grabs your bag, let it go. If you hang on, you could get hurt. Remember your safety is more important than your property.

- If you think someone is following you, check by crossing the street – more than once if necessary – to see if he follows. If you are still worried, get to the nearest place where there are other people – a pub or anywhere with a lot of lights on – and call the police. Avoid using an enclosed phone box in the street, as the attacker could trap you inside.
- If you regularly go jogging or cycling, try to vary your route and time. Stick to well-lit roads with pavements. On commons and parklands, keep to main paths and open spaces where you can see and be seen by other people – avoid wooded areas. If you wear a personal stereo, remember you can't hear traffic, or somebody approaching behind you.
- Don't take short-cuts through dark alleys, parks or across waste ground. Walk facing the traffic so a car cannot pull up behind you unnoticed.
- If a car stops and you are threatened, scream and shout, and set off your personal attack alarm if you have one. Get away as quickly as you can. This will gain you vital seconds and make it more difficult for the car driver to follow. If you can, make a mental note of the number and description of the car. Write down details as soon as possible afterwards.
- Don't hitch-hike or take lifts from strangers.
- Cover up expensive looking jewellery.
- Self-defense and safety awareness classes may help you feel more secure. Ask your local police or your work if they have classes.

Staying safe in taxis and private hire vehicles

- If you are going to be out late or don't want to travel on public transport on your own, try to arrange a lift home with someone you know or make your journey by taxi or private hire vehicle (PHV, sometimes called a minicab).
- Taxis and PHVs give you a degree of protection because vehicles and drivers must meet suitability criteria, including local minimum standards for vehicles and a criminal record and health checks for drivers, before they are licensed by your local council (district/borough council, unitary authority or Transport for London).
- You can hail a taxi on the street or at a rank as well as pre-booking it but you can only pre-book a PHV through a licensed PHV operator (not a PHV driver).
- You should always ensure that you travel in a licensed taxi and PHV by checking the vehicle's signage or plate and the driver's badge. You should never agree to travel in an unlicensed vehicle with an unlicensed driver.
- Check that the taxi or PHV that arrives is the one you ordered. Ask for a description of the car - color, make, etc - and check this when it arrives. You could also ask for the name of the driver beforehand.
- If you pre-book your taxi or PHV, make a note of the company you are using, and the telephone number, and if possible leave it with a friend.
- When you get to your destination, ask the driver to wait until you are inside.
- If you are approached by someone in the street offering (ie touting for) a taxi or PHV journey, ignore them. Touting is an offence. Indeed, it has recently been made recordable so that fingerprinting and DNA tests can be made on offenders.
- If travelling alone, always sit behind the driver in the back seat.
- If you feel uneasy, ask to be let out in a well-lit area where there are plenty of people.
- If in any doubt, make an excuse and don't get in the vehicle.
- The security of drivers is important too. Safety and security aids will range from a simple Perspex screen between the driver and passenger of a saloon car to sophisticated CCTV equipment.

Staying safe on public transport

- Try to stay away from isolated bus stops, especially after dark.
- On an empty bus, sit near the driver or conductor.

- On a train, sit in a compartment where there are several other people – ideally one which will be near the exit of your destination. Check to see where the emergency chain is.

When driving

- Before a long trip, make sure your vehicle is in good condition.
- Plan how to get to your destination before leaving, and stay on main roads if you can.
- Make sure you have enough money and petrol. Carry a spare petrol can.
- Keep change and a phone card in case you need to make a telephone call. Carry a torch.
- Before you leave, tell anyone you are planning to meet what time you think you will get there, and the route you are taking.
- If someone tries to flag you down, drive on until you come to a service station, or somewhere busy, and call the police. Do not pick up hitch-hikers.
- Keep doors locked when driving and keep any bag, car phone or valuables out of sight. If you have the window open, only wind it down a little. Don't wind it down far enough to allow someone to reach in while you are stopped in traffic.
- If you think you are being followed, try to alert others by flashing your lights and sounding your horn. Make as much noise as possible. If you can, keep driving until you come to a busy place.
- After dark, park in a well-lit, busy place. Look around before you get out. If you're parking in daylight, but coming back for your car at night, think about how things will look in the dark.
- Have your key ready when you go back to your car. Make sure there is no-one in the car.
- If your car develops problems, find a telephone. On motorways follow the marker arrows to the closest phone. They are never placed any more than a mile apart, on opposite sides of the motorway. **Never** cross the carriageway to use a phone.
- While on the hard shoulder or telephoning, keep a sharp look-out and don't accept lifts from strangers – wait for the police or breakdown service. Don't wait in the car – there is a high risk of an accident. Wait on the embankment nearby with the front passenger door open. If someone approaches you or you feel threatened, lock yourself in the car and speak to them through a small gap in the window.
- If you frequently have to travel after dark, or if your job involves visiting people at home, eg a health visitor or a district nurse, consider getting a mobile phone or ask your employer to provide one.

What men can do

Men can help by taking the issue of women's safety seriously in their everyday lives. Bear these points in mind:

- If you are walking in the same direction as a woman on her own, don't walk behind her – this may worry her. Cross the road and walk on the other side. This may reassure her that you are not following her.
- Don't sit too close to a woman on her own in a railcar, subway or bus.
- If you are thinking of chatting to a woman waiting, for example, at a lonely bus stop, remember that she won't know you mean no harm.
- Realize how threatening actions such as staring, whistling, passing comments and jostling can be, particularly when you are one of a group of men.
- Help female friends or family members by giving them a lift or walking them home when you can. If you do, make sure they are safely indoors before you leave.

If the worst happens

Think what you would do if someone attacked you. Could you fight back, or would you avoid resisting and wait to escape? Only you can decide whether to fight back, but preparing yourself for all possibilities could provide a split-second advantage.

- If someone threatens you, shout and scream for help and set off your personal attack alarm if you have one. This may unnerve the attacker and frighten him off.
- You have every right to defend yourself, with reasonable force with items which you have with you like an umbrella, hairspray or keys can be used against the attacker. The law however doesn't allow carrying anything which can be described as an offensive weapon.

If you have been attacked

Assaults and rapes are serious crimes, whether committed by a stranger or someone you know.

- Call the police straightaway. They need your help to catch the attacker. You can help the police by:
 - Taking the name or address of any witness
 - Trying to remember exactly what the attacker looked like
 - If a car was involved, try to note the color, model and registration number.
- You do not need to go to the police station to report an assault – you can be interviewed in your own home if you wish. These crimes are dealt with sympathetically, regardless of sex. Police stations have specially trained officers who will help and support you, and many areas have comfortable victim suites, separate from the police station, where you can be interviewed privately.
- Although your immediate reaction will be to wash, try not to if you can possibly help it. It will destroy vital medical evidence that will help prove the case against the person who raped or assaulted you.
- Should your case come to trial, by law your anonymity will be guaranteed if you are female, or under 18 years old. The law forbids newspapers to publish anything that might identify you. Also, as a general rule, you should not be asked about your previous sexual history in court.
- If the violence is within your family, legal protection is possible under either civil or criminal law. In some cases for example, they can require a husband or partner not to enter your home, or even your neighborhood.

This advice has been taken from **“Your Practical Guide to Crime Prevention”**.

To order a personal copy contact the Crime Prevention Officer at your local police station or write to:

Crime Prevention Publicity
Home Office
Room 155
50 Queen Anne's Gate
London SW1H 9AT

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