

What are the steps of how the police handle a call regarding a sexual assault

In San Diego County, law enforcement agencies (like the San Diego Police Department or San Diego County Sheriff's Department) follow fairly standardized procedures for handling a reported sexual assault. While details can vary slightly by agency and situation, here's a clear, step-by-step overview of how a typical case is handled:

1. The Initial Call (911 or Non-Emergency)

- A report may come in through **911** (if immediate danger) or a non-emergency line.
- The dispatcher gathers key information:
 - Location of the victim
 - Whether the suspect is still nearby
 - Immediate safety concerns
 - Basic details of what happened
- Priority is usually high due to the serious nature of the crime.

2. Officer Dispatch & Arrival

- Patrol officers are sent to the scene.
- Their **first priority is safety**:
 - Ensure the suspect is gone or detained
 - Check for injuries and call paramedics if needed
- Officers separate involved parties to preserve statements and prevent contamination of information.

3. Initial Interview (Preliminary Statement)

- Officers conduct a **brief, trauma-informed interview**:
 - Focused on *what happened, when, and where*
 - Not a full interrogation—just enough to understand the situation
- Victims are **not pressured to give every detail immediately**

4. Medical Care & Forensic Exam

- Victims are often offered a **Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)** exam:
 - Conducted at a hospital by specially trained nurses
 - Evidence collection (often called a “rape kit”)
- In San Diego County, this is coordinated with trained professionals and advocates.

- Important: Victims can usually choose to have an exam **even if they are unsure about pressing charges.**

5. Notification of Detectives

- A specialized unit (often **Sex Crimes or Special Victims Unit**) is notified.
- Detectives may:
 - Respond to the scene or hospital
 - Take over the investigation from patrol officers

6. Detailed Interview

- Conducted by trained detectives
- Typically more in-depth and done in a controlled, private setting
- May be recorded
- Victims can often have an advocate present (from local support organizations)

7. Evidence Collection Beyond the Exam

- Police may collect:
 - Clothing
 - Surveillance footage
 - Phone records or messages
 - Witness statements
- Scene processing may occur if the assault location is known

8. Suspect Identification & Interview

- If a suspect is known:
 - Detectives may attempt an interview
 - They may seek a warrant if probable cause exists
- If unknown:
 - Investigators may use forensic evidence (like DNA databases)

9. Case Review & Submission to Prosecutor

- Once enough evidence is gathered, the case is submitted to the San Diego County District Attorney's Office
- Prosecutors decide whether to file criminal charges based on:
 - Evidence strength

- Victim statement
- Legal standards

10. Victim Support & Follow-Up

- Victims are typically connected with advocacy groups (like rape crisis centers)
- They may receive:
 - Updates on the case
 - Help navigating court proceedings
 - Counseling resources

Important Notes

- California law emphasizes **victim consent and autonomy** throughout the process.
- Victims can often:
 - Decline parts of the process
 - Delay deciding about prosecution
- Officers are trained in **trauma-informed response**, though experiences can vary.

What to do immediately after an assault to preserve evidence

If someone has just experienced a sexual assault, the priority is **their safety and medical care first**—but there are also important steps that can help preserve evidence if they choose to report later.

In San Diego County, these are the recommended steps:

1. Get to a Safe Place

- Move somewhere secure (home, a trusted friend's place, or a public safe location).
- If in immediate danger, call **911**.

2. Try Not to Alter Physical Evidence

If possible (and only if it feels okay to do so):

- **Do not shower, bathe, or wash**
- Avoid brushing teeth or using mouthwash
- Do not change clothes
- Avoid using the restroom (if you can)

These actions can remove or degrade DNA evidence.

3. Preserve Clothing & Items

- If you've already changed clothes:
 - Place the clothing worn during the assault in a **paper bag** (not plastic)
- Keep anything that may contain evidence:
 - Bedding, towels, condoms, or other items
- Avoid handling these items more than necessary

4. Seek Medical Care ASAP

- Go to an emergency room or a facility that offers a **Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)** exam
- In San Diego County, this process is coordinated with law enforcement and medical providers like those working with the San Diego County Sheriff's Department and San Diego Police Department
- Ideally within **72 hours**, but evidence can sometimes still be collected after that

Important:

You can usually get a forensic exam **without deciding to press charges right away**.

5. Avoid Cleaning the Scene (If Applicable)

- If the assault occurred in a specific location (home, car, etc.), try not to clean or disturb it before police can document it

6. Write Down What You Remember

- As soon as you're able, jot down:
 - What happened
 - Time and location
 - Description of the person(s) involved
- Even small details can be important later

7. Save Digital Evidence

- Do not delete:
 - Text messages
 - Social media messages
 - Call logs
- Take screenshots if possible

8. Consider Contacting Support Services

Even if you're unsure about reporting:

- You can call a confidential hotline like RAINN (800-656-HOPE)
- They can guide you through options and connect you to local resources

9. Reporting Is Your Choice

- You can report immediately, later, or not at all
- In California, you can often request that evidence be collected and stored while you decide

A Final Note

These steps are about **preserving options**, not obligations. If someone has already showered or changed clothes, it does **not** mean a case can't move forward—other evidence and testimony can still matter.

How long do investigations usually take

In San Diego County, sexual assault investigations don't follow a fixed timeline—the length can vary widely depending on the details of the case. That said, there are some realistic ranges and factors that tend to influence how long things take when handled by agencies like the San Diego Police Department or San Diego County Sheriff's Department.

Typical Timeline Ranges

◆ Initial phase (days to a few weeks)

- Patrol report completed within hours to a couple days
- Case assigned to a detective (often within a few days)
- Initial follow-up interviews and evidence collection begin

◆ Active investigation (1–3 months is common)

- Detailed victim and witness interviews
- Suspect identification and interviews
- Collection of digital evidence (texts, surveillance, etc.)
- Forensic evidence submitted for testing

◆ Forensic delays (2–6+ months, sometimes longer)

- DNA testing (rape kit processing) can significantly extend timelines
- Backlogs or lab complexity can push this out further

◆ Case review and filing decision (weeks to months)

- Once the investigation is complete, it's submitted to the San Diego County District Attorney's Office

- Prosecutors may take **several weeks to a few months** to decide whether to file charges

Total Time (Realistically)

- **Fast-moving case (known suspect, strong evidence):** ~1–3 months
- **Average case:** ~3–9 months
- **Complex case (DNA, unknown suspect, multiple witnesses):** 6–18+ months

What Affects the Timeline

Speeds things up:

- Suspect is known and located quickly
- Clear evidence (video, witnesses, admissions)
- Prompt reporting and forensic exam

Slows things down:

- Unknown suspect (requires DNA or extensive investigation)
- Delayed reporting (evidence harder to collect)
- Digital evidence (phones, social media warrants take time)
- Lab backlogs for DNA testing
- Victim or witness availability

Important Context

- Investigations are often **not continuous day-to-day work**—there can be gaps while waiting for lab results, warrants, or interviews.
- Detectives may handle multiple cases at once, which can add time.
- Even after charges are filed, the **court process can take another year or more.**

Who makes up the Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)?

In San Diego County, the **Sexual Assault Response Team (SART)** is a **formal, coordinated system** made up of specific professionals who respond together to sexual assault cases. The goal is to handle **medical care, evidence collection, investigation, and victim support at the same time**, rather than separately.

Here's a **precise breakdown of who is on the team and their roles:**

Core SART Members (Respond Together)

1. Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE)

- A **registered nurse with specialized forensic training**
- Usually part of a hospital-based forensic program (such as those at major San Diego hospitals)

What they do:

- Perform the **forensic exam (rape kit)**
- Collect and preserve biological evidence (DNA, swabs, clothing documentation)
- Photograph and document injuries for court
- Provide medical care:
 - Treat injuries
 - Offer STI prevention medications
 - Provide emergency contraception (if applicable)

👉 They are the **primary medical and forensic evidence specialist**

2. Law Enforcement Officer

- From agencies like the San Diego Police Department or San Diego County Sheriff's Department

What they do:

- Ensure immediate safety and secure any crime scene
- Take the **initial report and statement**
- Coordinate the criminal investigation
- Collect additional evidence (scene evidence, digital evidence, witness statements)
- Identify, locate, and interview suspects

👉 They are responsible for the **criminal investigation and case building**

3. Victim Advocate

- Typically from a local rape crisis center, most commonly the Center for Community Solutions

What they do:

- Provide **emotional support from the very beginning**
- Stay with the victim during the exam and interviews (if the victim wants)
- Explain rights and options clearly (reporting, exam, legal process)
- Help with resources:
 - Counseling
 - Shelter (if needed)

- Follow-up services

👉 They are **100% focused on the victim's well-being**, not the investigation

Additional SART-Connected Members (Case Progression)

These professionals are part of the SART system but may not all be physically present at the initial response:

4. Prosecutors

- From the San Diego County District Attorney's Office

What they do:

- Review the case once evidence is collected
- Decide whether to file criminal charges
- Provide legal guidance to detectives during the investigation
- Handle prosecution in court

5. Forensic Crime Lab Analysts

- Work in regional crime labs

What they do:

- Analyze DNA and other forensic evidence collected during the exam
- Produce lab reports used in court
- Testify as expert witnesses if needed

6. Forensic Interviewers (especially for minors)

- Specially trained interview specialists

What they do:

- Conduct **structured, legally sound interviews**
- Minimize trauma and avoid leading questions
- Often used in child or vulnerable victim cases

7. Medical Program Coordinators / SART Coordinators

- Often part of county EMS or hospital systems

What they do:

- Coordinate scheduling of SANE nurses
- Ensure proper evidence handling and documentation
- Facilitate communication between agencies

- Maintain SART protocols and quality control

8. Child Welfare & Other Specialists (when applicable)

- May include:
 - Child Protective Services
 - Domestic violence specialists
 - Mental health professionals

How the Team Works Together (Key Feature)

What makes SART distinct in San Diego County is **simultaneous, coordinated response**:

- The **SANE nurse** handles medical care and forensic evidence
- The **law enforcement officer** handles the investigation
- The **advocate** supports the victim

They often work **together at the hospital during the same time window**, which:

- Reduces the need for the victim to repeat their story
- Preserves evidence more effectively
- Provides immediate emotional and medical support

Bottom Line

A SART team in San Diego County is a **multi-agency collaboration**, specifically made up of:

- **Forensic nurse (SANE)** → medical care + evidence
- **Police or sheriff's officer** → investigation
- **Victim advocate (e.g., Center for Community Solutions)** → support
- **Plus prosecutors, lab analysts, and specialists behind the scenes**

All coordinated to handle **medical, legal, and emotional needs in one unified response**.