



Pick Your Path to Health

Defend Yourself!

You parked your car at the end of the parking lot so you could get in a little exercise, but you didn't intend to leave so late. Now you're alone, and there's no street lamp in sight. A man jumps out of the shadows. What do you do? Self-defense comes to mind, but before you try it, learning more about it can make you more effective.

Self-defense is a set of awareness, assertiveness, verbal confrontation skills, safety strategies and physical techniques that can help you to prevent, escape, resist, and survive violent assaults. A good self-defense course uses all of these strategies to help you avoid or interrupt an attack, not just physical training in martial arts like karate or tae kwon do. So here are some things you should know about protecting yourself.

Should you fight back?

Think about these questions before you ever get in such a desperate situation. When the time comes, you'll have to do a quick evaluation.

1. Am I completely isolated? Is there help or safety nearby?
2. What are my physical, mental, and emotional capabilities? Am I able to resist? Am I willing to cause grave injury to an assailant?
3. How much strength and power does he appear to have? Does he have a weapon or an accomplice? Is he angry, nervous, hesitant, or calm? Do I know him, or is he a complete stranger?

Should you use a weapon?

Any device is useless unless you know how to use it and you have it ready when you need it. Mace and pepper spray, for example, are not foolproof, and neither can be counted on to work against all possible attackers.

Know that anything you use against an attacker can also be used against you. While some of the devices can be helpful in some situations, it is best not to depend on them and to be aware of their limitations. Your brain and your body are the best primary weapons you have, say self-defense experts. Everything else is a weapon of opportunity.

What should you know about fighting?

It is important to locate the weak points in the body in order to maximize your opportunity for escape.

- One of the most important of these points is the eyes, which are both fragile and essential, a prime target for attack. This attack can disable an attacker instantly, leaving him, in some cases, with permanent eye damage.
- The tiny bones that make up the instep of the foot and a person's toes are very vulnerable and easy to break. Use your heel to make the strike; to get the desired effect you will need to bring your knee up as far as possible and then slam it down, ankle flexed upward so your heel hits first.
- Knees are very unstable and vulnerable joints. If your back is to an assailant, bring your knee up and kick straight back.
- Use your head as a battering ram against your assailant's nose and mouth.
- If your arms are pinned but your hands are free, attempt to step backward as close to your assailant as possible. Then use your strongest hand to reach back and grab a handful of testicles or pinch as hard as you can on the inside of his thigh as close to the groin as possible.
- If your assailant is holding you in a tight grasp, grab one finger on his hand. The weakest fingers are the pinkie and the ring finger. Wrap your hand as best as possible around one of these fingers and with a sharp motion down and back, make the back of the finger smash into the back of your assailant's hand. You must do this quickly, forcefully and be committed to the act. If your assailant is holding your hand in such a way you can't get a good grip on the pinkie or ring finger, don't give up. The index finger or the thumb will be as effective; they just require more force.
- Once you are free, run to the closest safe place and call the police to handle the matter from there. Save the martial arts moves for the gym; all those kicks do give you nice legs and glutes.

Most important, sign up for a self-defense course. Reading about these tactics and doing them are very different experiences. Learning more about self-defense can help keep you safe and on a path to better health.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services. For more information about the campaign or to subscribe to the listserv to receive tips on improving your health, call 1-800-994-WOMAN or TDD at 1-888-220-5446 or visit the National Women's Health

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