Sexually Transmitted Infections

Health Manual

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Overview

What Are Sexually Transmitted Infections?

A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection that can spread from one person to another during sex. Some STIs such as HIV can be very dangerous, and all can be harmful for the body. Many STIs, however, are treatable with medication.

Both married and single women can get an STI, which is why it’s important that you and your partner get checked regularly. The best way to prevent against STIs is by using a condom every time you have sex.

STIs are infections passed from one person to another during sex. Any type of sex can cause an STI. It can be penis to vagina sex, or penis-to-anus sex, or oral sex (mouth to penis or mouth to vagina). Sometimes STIs can happen from just rubbing an infected penis or vagina against another person’s genitals. STIs can be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby before it is born or during childbirth. STIs increase the risk of getting or transmitting HIV.

Unless they are treated early, STIs can cause:

» Infertility in both men and women
» Babies born too early, too small, blind, sick, or dead
» Tubal (ectopic) pregnancy (outside the womb)
» Death from severe infection
» Lasting pain in the lower abdomen
» Cancer of the cervix

At-Risk Populations

Any person who has unprotected sex is at risk, but these populations are more susceptible to acquiring an STI:

» Men who have sex with men
» Men and women who have multiple sex partners
» Men and women with HIV or AIDS
» Communities with poor access to health care

Why Do so Many Women Get STIs?

Men and women can both get STIs. But a woman gets infected from a man more easily than a man gets infected from a woman. This is because a man’s penis goes into some part of a woman’s body—such as her vagina, mouth, or anus—during sex. Without a condom, the man’s semen, which may carry infection, stays inside her body, which gives her a greater chance of getting an infection in her womb, tubes, and ovaries. When a woman has sores on her genitals or irritation from an infection in the vagina, she can also get HIV more easily. Because most STIs are inside a woman’s body, the signs of an STI in a woman are harder to see than in a man. It is often hard to tell if a woman has an infection in her genitals—much less what kind of infection she has.
What to Do if You Have Symptoms of an STI or Are at Risk for an STI

There are several different kinds of STIs, and each has its own symptoms. Sores on the genitals and pain while urinating or during sex could be signs of an STI.

Other symptoms of an STI include:

- Unusual or foul-smelling vaginal discharge
- Itching genitals
- Painful genitals
- Sores or blisters on the genitals
- Pain in the lower abdomen or pain during sex

But sometimes a woman can have an STI and show no symptoms.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE SIGNS OF AN STI

As soon as a person experiences a possible symptom of an STI, he or she should seek treatment right away. It’s important to not wait until you are very ill. Treatment will protect you from more serious problems later on, and it will prevent the spread of STIs to others. It’s also just as important that your partner gets treated at the same time. If he does not get treated, he will infect you again if you have sex with him again or will infect someone else.

One way to ensure that you are not spreading an infection to someone else is to get tested before you have sex with a new partner. Even if you do not have any symptoms, you could be infected with an STI and should get tested.

If you have been diagnosed with an STI by a doctor or other trained health worker, buy and take all the medicine as recommended. Even if your symptoms go away, you will not be cured until all the medicine has time to work. If the symptoms do not go away after taking the medicines, see a health worker. Pain or vaginal discharge could also be caused by another serious infection or by cancer.
Prevention Methods

Most Effective Methods of Protecting against STIs

There are a number of ways to reduce your risk of getting an STI. Some methods or approaches give good protection, such as:

» Abstain or have sexual contact with only one partner who is not infected and only has sex with you
» Get tested before having sex with a new partner, and ask the person to get tested and share the results with you.
» Use latex condoms every time you have sex even if you are married.

Other Methods or Approaches to Protecting against STIs

Other methods or approaches offer some protection from STIs and are better than doing nothing if you are unable to do the above methods. These are:

» If your partner will not use a condom, a diaphragm helps protect against some STIs.
» Wash the outside of your genitals after sex.
» Pass urine after having sex.
» Do not douche, or do not use herbs or powders to dry out the vagina. Douching (and washing out the vagina with soap) works against the natural wetness the vagina makes to stay healthy. When the vagina is dry, it can become irritated during sex, making it more likely to be infected with HIV and other STIs.1

It can be hard for a woman to protect herself from an STI. Often, she must have sex when her partner demands it. She may not know if her partner has sex with other partners, or if he is infected with an STI. If he has another partner who is infected, he may infect his wife. The best way to protect against STIs is by using a condom, but some men will resist using a condom. If you put some lubricant inside the tip of the condom before unrolling it onto the penis, it can make condom use more pleasurable for a man and make him more likely to accept condom use.

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Six Steps of Proper Male Condom Use

The following steps outline the proper way to use a male condom:

» **Step 1: Check the condom wrapper and condom to ensure that it is not out of date or damaged.** Check the expiration date on the condom package, and look for signs of wear such as discolored, torn, or brittle wrappers. Do not use condoms that have passed the expiration date or seem old.

» **Step 2: Open the condom wrapper carefully.** Tear the package carefully along one side. It is better not to use the teeth or fingernails to avoid damaging the condom.

» **Step 3: Place the rolled-up condom on the top of the penis.**

» **Step 4: Pinch the tip of the condom** (to leave space for the semen to collect).

» **Step 5: Place the condom on the end of the penis and unroll the condom down the length of the penis by pushing down on the round rim of the condom.** If this is difficult, the condom is probably inside out. You should not turn the condom the other way around as some semen could already be on it. You should open another condom and unroll it correctly over the penis. When the rim of the condom is at the base of the penis (near the pubic hair), penetration can begin.

» **Step 6: After intercourse and ejaculation, carefully remove the condom.** After intercourse and ejaculation, hold the rim of the condom and pull the penis out before it gets soft. Remove the condom and tie it in a knot, sealing in the semen. Dispose of the condom in a safe place. Use a new condom each time you have penetrative sex.²

Five Steps of Proper Female Condom Use

To insert a female condom take the following steps:

» **Step 1: Apply spermicide or lubricant** on the outside of the closed end. Apply spermicide or lubricant to the outside of the closed end of the female condom.

» **Step 2: Insert the female condom.** Find a comfortable position. You can stand with one foot on a chair, sit on the edge of a chair, lie down, or squat. Squeeze together the sides of the inner ring at the closed end of the condom, and insert it into the vagina like a tampon.

» **Step 4: Push the inner ring into the vagina as far as it can go**—until it reaches the cervix. Pull out your finger and let the outer ring hang about an inch outside the vagina.

» **Step 5: After intercourse and ejaculation, carefully remove the condom.** After intercourse and ejaculation, squeeze and twist the outer ring to keep semen inside the pouch. Gently pull the condom out of the vagina or anus. Throw it away. Do not flush it down the toilet. Do not reuse the female condom.

During vaginal intercourse, it is normal for the female condom to move side to side. Stop intercourse if the penis slips between the condom and the walls of the vagina or if the outer ring is pushed into the vagina. As long as your partner has not yet ejaculated, you can gently remove the condom from the vagina, add extra spermicide or lubricant, and insert it once again.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Adapted from *Female Condom*, Planned Parenthood, [www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/female-condom-4223.htm](http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control/female-condom-4223.htm).
Gonorrhea and Chlamydia

Gonorrhea and chlamydia are both serious STIs, but they are easy to cure if treated early. If not, they can cause severe infection and infertility in both women and men. In a man, the signs usually begin two to five days after he has sex with an infected person. But a man can have no signs and still be infected. In a woman, the signs may not begin for weeks or even months. Even if you do not have any signs, you can still pass gonorrhea and chlamydia to another person.

Transmission and Symptoms

Gonorrhea can be spread through any kind of sexual contact with an infected person, whether vaginal, oral, or anal. Ejaculation does not need to occur in order for gonorrhea to be transmitted. Since gonorrhea and chlamydia have the same symptoms, get treated for both.

SYMPTOMS IN A WOMAN
- Yellow or green discharge from the vagina or anus
- Pain or burning when passing urine
- Fever
- Pain in the lower belly
- Pain or bleeding during sex
- Or no symptoms at all

SYMPTOMS IN A MAN
- Discharge from his penis
- Pain or burning when he passes urine
- Pain or swelling of the testicles
- Or no symptoms at all

Treatment

Antibiotics can successfully cure gonorrhea and chlamydia. If you suspect that you have either gonorrhea or chlamydia, see a doctor right away so that you can receive treatment. Persons with gonorrhea or chlamydia should be tested for other STIs so that treatment can be adequately prescribed for both.

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is an STI caused by a virus. It produces sores on the genitals or in the mouth that come and go for months or years. There is no cure for herpes, but there is treatment to make you feel better.

Transmission

A person can contract genital herpes through direct (sexual) contact with an infected person during an outbreak. Sores do not have to be apparent for a person to contract herpes.

Symptoms

Most infected people do not experience any symptoms or experience only mild symptoms.

» Tingling, itching, or painful skin in the genital area or on the thighs
» Small blisters that burst and form painful, open sores on the genitals

The first time you get herpes sores, they can last for three weeks or more. You can have a fever, headache, body ache, chills, and swollen lymph nodes in the groin. The next infection will be milder.

Treatment

Currently, there is no cure for herpes, but antiviral medications can reduce the length of outbreaks. See a doctor if you have any signs of herpes.

HOME REMEDIES

There are some ways that you can help yourself feel better when you are having a herpes outbreak.

» Wrap a piece of ice in a clean cloth. Put it directly on the sore for 20 minutes as soon as you feel the sore.
» Make a compress by soaking some cloth in clean water with black tea, and put it on the sore.
» Sit in a pan or bath of clean, cool water.

Prevention

See prevention methods (p. 4).

Herpes and Pregnancy

Herpes can cause infections in babies that could be fatal. Women should take precautions to avoid contracting herpes during pregnancy. If you have herpes and are pregnant, tell your doctor that you have the disease. Try to give birth in a hospital. The hospital may be able to do an operation to get the baby out or to give the baby special medication when it is born. If a woman who has herpes has an outbreak during delivery, a Cesarean section will usually be performed to deliver the baby.
HIV and AIDS

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a very small germ, called a virus, that you cannot see. AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) is a disease that develops later, after a person has been infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

When a person becomes infected with HIV, the virus attacks the immune system, the part of your body that fights off infection. HIV slowly kills the cells of the immune system until the body can no longer defend itself against other infections. Most people who are infected do not get sick from it for five to ten years. But eventually the immune system becomes unable to fight off common infections. Because HIV takes years to make someone sick, many people with HIV feel healthy and do not know they have it.

Transmission

HIV lives in certain body fluids of people infected with HIV—blood, semen, breast milk, and the vaginal fluids. The virus spreads when these fluids get into the body of another person. HIV is not in saliva and cannot be spread simply by touching someone who is infected. The most common way HIV spreads is through unprotected sex.

MYTH: You can get HIV from kissing or shaking hands.
TRUTH: HIV lives only in certain body fluids of people infected with HIV—blood, semen, breast milk, and the vaginal fluids. The virus spreads when these fluids get into the body of another person. HIV is not in saliva and cannot be spread simply by touching someone who is infected. The most common way HIV spreads is through unprotected sex.

MYTH: People with HIV look ill.
TRUTH: People with HIV do not always look or feel ill. In fact, many people do not know they are infected with HIV. For this reason it is always important that we protect ourselves by using a condom during sex.

Who Can Get HIV

Millions of people are infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. More and more of them are women and girls. There is no cure for HIV or AIDS, but treatment can help people with HIV live longer and stay healthy. To provide care for those who need it and to protect ourselves and each other from HIV and AIDS, we must be willing to talk about HIV with our families and friends.

Many women do not think they are at risk of getting HIV infection, because they may think that only homosexuals, women who have many sex partners (like a sex worker), or women who use drugs are the only ones who get infected with HIV. This is not true. In some communities, married women get HIV at higher rates than anyone else in the community. This is because their husbands are infected.

Why HIV and AIDS Are Different for Women

» Women get infected with HIV more easily than men do because during sex, a woman is the “receiver,” which means that a man’s semen stays in the her...
vagina for a long time. And if there is HIV in the semen, there is a greater chance for it to pass into a woman’s blood through her vagina or cervix, especially if she has any cuts, sores, or STIs.

» Women are often infected at a younger age than men. Young women and girls are less able to refuse unwanted or unsafe sex and are often married at a young age to older men who have had more chances to become infected.

» Women often live with untreated STIs, which make it easier to become infected with HIV.

» Women get more blood transfusions than men because of problems during childbirth.

» Poor nutrition and weakness from frequent childbearing make women less able to fight disease.

» Women are blamed unfairly for the spread of AIDS, even though many men are unwilling to wear condoms or limit their number of sex partners.

» A pregnant woman infected with HIV can pass it to her baby.

» Women are usually the caretakers for family members who are sick with AIDS, even if they are sick themselves.

Diagnosis

The only way to be sure that you or your partner does not have HIV is by getting tested. When HIV enters the body, the body starts to make antibodies right away to fight the virus. These antibodies usually show up in the blood two to four weeks later. The HIV test looks for these antibodies in the blood. An HIV test is the only way to know if a person has been infected with HIV.

A positive HIV test means that you are infected with the virus. Even if you feel completely well, the HIV is slowly weakening your immune system and the virus can spread to others any time you have unprotected sex.

A negative HIV test means one of two things: You are not infected with HIV, or you were recently infected but your body has not yet made enough antibodies to HIV to test positive. It takes about a month after you become infected for the HIV test to be positive. If you have tested negative for HIV but think you might be infected, you should take the test again in about six weeks. Sometimes a positive test also needs to be repeated. A health worker can help you decide.

Symptoms

The following may be warning signs of HIV infection:

» **Weight loss**: Weight loss is a common HIV symptom. Unless you are actively trying to lose weight by exercising and watching what you eat, weight loss is a serious problem.

» **Repeated respiratory infections**: Dry or productive cough, pneumonia (an infection and inflammation of the lower respiratory tract associated with a high mortality rate) and/or tuberculosis (fever, productive cough, hemoptysis and chest pain)

» **Recurring fever or profuse night sweats**

» **Profound and unexplained fatigue (tiredness or weakness)**: Fatigue can be a common problem for those living with HIV. Increase your energy level by first identifying the cause of your fatigue.

» **Swollen lymph glands in the armpits, groin, or neck**
» **Diarrhea that lasts for more than a week:** Diarrhea is the recent change in constancy and character of stool and/or passing more than three watery stools per day. Diarrhea can be a life-threatening problem if it is not treated correctly and rapidly. In addition it is one of the most annoying HIV symptoms. Diarrhea purges the body of needed fluid and electrolytes, resulting in dehydration and electrolyte imbalance.

» **White spots or unusual blemishes on the tongue, in the mouth, or in the throat (thrush):** In people with weakened immune systems, such as people infected with HIV, the fungus (*Candida albicans*) grows unchecked, appearing in colonies of white patches in the mouth, throat, esophagus (food tube), and vagina. *Candida* found in the mouth is called thrush. Symptoms of thrush are a stale, pasty, bad-tasting coating on the tongue and oral cavity.

» **Red, brown, or pink marks on or under the skin or inside the mouth, nose, or eyelids**

» **Memory loss, depression, and other neurological disorders**

**Remember:** Each of these symptoms can be related to or associated with other illnesses. Do not assume the person is infected if they have any of the above symptoms. The only way to determine if a person is infected or not is by testing for HIV specifically.

**Prevention**

You can prevent the spread of HIV in several ways:

» If possible, have sex with only one partner (who has sex only with you).

» Practice safer sex—sex that prevents semen, blood, and vaginal fluids from getting into your vagina, anus, or mouth. Use condoms correctly whenever you have sex.

» Get tested for HIV and treated for other STIs, and make sure your partners do too.
» Avoid piercing or cutting the skin with needles or other tools that have not been disinfected between uses.
» Do not share razors.
» Do not touch someone else’s blood or wound without protection, such as nonabsorbent gloves or even plastic bags on your hands.

Cure

Currently there is no cure for HIV, however, adhering to antiretroviral therapy can slow and nearly halt the progression of HIV in the body. Increasingly, people living with HIV are able to continue living productive lives for extended periods of time, even in low-income countries.

HIV and AIDS Testing5

There are a number of tests to determine whether someone is infected with HIV. There are also a number of tests available once a person has been diagnosed with HIV. It is important for all women to get tested even if they have been with only one partner. They key to living a healthy life with HIV is getting diagnosed early. HIV antibody tests are the most appropriate test for routine diagnosis of HIV among adults. Women who know their status can also protect their partners and children.

For women who plan to become pregnant, testing is even more important. Women should be tested during each pregnancy. If a pregnant woman discovers that she is infected with HIV, certain medical care and drugs can lower the chance of passing HIV to her baby.

» EIA (enzyme immunoassay) test: The test draws blood from a vein, or collects oral fluid or urine to look for antibodies that someone infected with HIV produces to fight the infection. If these antibodies are detected, the person is most likely HIV positive.

» Rapid HIV test: This test looks for antibodies in the blood or saliva, but it does not require laboratory analysis. They are easier to use and produce results within 20 minutes. They tests must be followed up with another test to confirm final diagnosis.

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» A positive HIV test means that the person is infected with the virus. Even if the person feels completely well, he or she can spread the virus to others.

» A negative HIV test means one of two things: The person is not infected with HIV or was recently infected, but his or her body has not yet made enough antibodies to HIV to test positive. If the person tested negative for HIV but thinks he or she might be infected, he or she should take the test again in about six weeks. Sometimes a positive test also needs to be repeated. A health worker can help the person to decide.

HIV and AIDS and Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Breast-feeding

PREGNANCY
Pregnancy itself does not make HIV worse for a mother. But her pregnancy can be more complicated if she has HIV or AIDS. She may:

» Lose the baby during pregnancy (miscarriage)
» Get infections after pregnancy that are harder to cure
» Give birth too soon or have a baby infected with HIV

Despite these problems, many women with HIV still want to get pregnant and have a child. If you want to get pregnant and you are not sure whether you or your partner are infected with HIV, you should both get tested. If you cannot get tested, you can reduce your risk of becoming infected with HIV while trying to get pregnant if you:

» Have sexual intercourse without a condom only during your fertile time. At all other times, use a condom or practice safer sex.
» Never have sexual intercourse when there are signs of an STI.

CHILDBIRTH
A baby can become infected while it is in your womb, during birth, or while breast-feeding. Without treatment, one out of three babies born to HIV-infected mothers becomes infected. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) medicines can protect your health and greatly reduce the risk of passing HIV infection to your baby. Check with a health worker trained in preventing mother-to-child transmission (PMTCT) about ART medicines during pregnancy and childbirth.

A mother with HIV always passes along the HIV antibodies, but not always the virus itself, to her baby. With the usual HIV test, the baby will have a positive result because the mother’s antibodies stay in the baby’s blood for 18 months. After that, the mother’s antibodies will disappear from the baby’s blood and, if the baby is not infected, the HIV test will be negative. A new blood test now available in some places can show if a baby is HIV positive from six weeks of age.

Most mother-to-child transmission of HIV happens during childbirth. Using ART medicines before and after birth can help protect the mother and the baby. The transmission risk is greatest when the mother’s water breaks more than four hours before birth, when the birth canal tears, and where the baby has more contact than usual with blood and vaginal fluids during birth. Infections after birth can be more dangerous if you have HIV. Get treated immediately.

BREAST-FEEDING
HIV infection can be passed from the mother to her baby in her breast milk. The risk is greater if the mother is newly infected or is very sick with AIDS. Some ways that mothers with HIV can reduce the risk of infecting their babies are:

» Take ART medicines for your own health or only while breast-feeding.
» Give the baby nothing but breast milk—not even water—until he or she is six months old.
» Prevent breast and nipple infections and cracked or bleeding nipples. See a health worker right away if you have any signs.
» Treat for thrush if you see white spots or sores in your baby’s mouth.
» Only give replacement feeding, such as formula, if you will be able to do it safely for the whole time the baby needs it (see below).

In many places the risk of diarrhea and malnutrition from other liquids and unclean water is much greater than the risk of HIV, especially in the baby's first six months. For these reasons, giving only breast milk for the first six months is usually the safest choice for the baby of a woman with HIV. After six months, add complementary foods, and then wean the baby at twelve months, if you can meet the baby's nutritional needs. It can take three days to three weeks to wean a baby.
Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a dangerous infection caused by a virus that harms the liver. Hepatitis B is spread when the blood, saliva (spit), fluid from the vagina, or semen of someone already infected with the virus gets into the body of another person. It spreads very easily from one person to another, especially during sex. If your partner has had some of these signs, do not have sex until he is completely well. Ask a health worker if you can get vaccinated.

Symptoms

» Fever
» No appetite
» Tired and weak feeling
» Yellow eyes and/or skin
» Pain in the belly
» Dark urine and whitish stools
» No symptoms at all

Treatment

There is no medicine that will help. In fact, taking medicine can hurt your liver even more. Most people get better from hepatitis B. A small number of people may have liver problems that never go away, including liver cancer. Rest as much as you can, and eat foods that are easy to digest. Do not drink any alcohol for at least six months.

Prevention

See prevention methods (p. 4).

Pregnancy and Hepatitis

If you have any of these signs when you are pregnant, see a health worker. You may be able to get a vaccination to prevent your baby from getting hepatitis B.
Syphilis

Syphilis is a serious STI that has effects throughout the body and can last for many years. It is caused by bacteria and can be cured with medicine if treated early. It is often referred to as the “great imitator” because so many of its signs and symptoms are indistinguishable from those of other diseases.

Transmission

Syphilis is transmitted from person to person through direct contact with syphilis sores, which occur mainly on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores can also occur on the lips and in the mouth. Transmission of the organism occurs during vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Pregnant women with the disease can pass it to the babies they are carrying.

Symptoms

» Primary Stage: Appearance of a single or multiple sores on the external genitals, vagina, anus, or in the rectum. Sores can also occur on the lips and in the mouth. These sore generally appear 10 to 90 days after infection. The sore is usually firm, round, small, and painless and appears at the place where syphilis entered the body. This sore lasts three to six weeks. Although the sore will heal on its own, if the person does not receive adequate treatment the infection will progress to the secondary stage.

» Secondary Stage: A skin rash and lesions appear in the secondary stage. They appear after the initial sore has healed or weeks later. The rash generally does not cause itching and can appear on other parts of the body, such as the palms or the bottoms of the feet. Other symptoms of the secondary stage include fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, patchy hair loss, headaches, weight loss, muscle aches, and fatigue. These symptoms will stop without treatment; however, without treatment, the infection may progress to late stages of disease.

» Late Stages: These stages are characterized by difficulty coordinating muscle movements, paralysis, numbness, gradual blindness, and dementia. Internal organs including the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints may also be damaged, which could even result in death.6

Treatment

In its early stages, syphilis is easily cured with medicine. Because syphilis is treatable, it is important that at-risk individuals get screened on a regular basis.

Prevention

See prevention methods (p. 4).

Pregnancy and Syphilis

A pregnant woman can pass syphilis to her unborn baby, which can cause it to be born too early, deformed, or dead. You can prevent this by getting a blood test and treatment during pregnancy.