



<http://www.womenshealth.gov>

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TDD: 1-888-220-5446

Sexually Transmitted Infections: Overview

Q: What is a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

A: It is an infection passed from person to person through intimate sexual contact. STIs are also called sexually transmitted diseases, or STIs.

Q: How many people have STIs and who is infected?

A: In the United States about 19 million new infections are thought to occur each year. These infections affect men and women of all backgrounds and economic levels. But almost half of new infections are among young people ages 15 to 24. Women are also severely affected by STIs. They have more frequent and more serious health problems from STIs than men. African-American women have especially high rates of infection.

Q: How do you get an STI?

A: You can get an STI by having intimate sexual contact with someone who

already has the infection. You can't tell if a person is infected because many STIs have no symptoms. But STIs can still be passed from person to person even if there are no symptoms. STIs are spread during vaginal, anal, or oral sex or during genital touching. So it's possible to get some STIs without having intercourse. Not all STIs are spread the same way.

Q: Can STIs cause health problems?

A: Yes. Each STI causes different health problems. But overall, untreated STIs can cause cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, pregnancy problems, widespread infection to other parts of the body, organ damage, and even death.

Having an STI also can put you at greater risk of getting HIV. For one, not stopping risky sexual behavior can lead to infection with other STIs, including HIV. Also, infection with some STIs makes it easier for you to get HIV if you are exposed.

Q: What are the symptoms of STIs?

A: Many STIs have only mild or no symptoms at all. When symptoms do develop, they often are mistaken for something else, such as urinary tract infection or yeast infection. This is why screening for STIs is so important. The STIs listed here are among the most common or harmful to women.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Symptoms of Sexually Transmitted Infections



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| STI | Symptoms |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) | <p>Most women have no symptoms. Women with symptoms may have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaginal itching • Pain when urinating • Discharge with a fishy odor |
| Chlamydia | <p>Most women have no symptoms. Women with symptoms may have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Abnormal vaginal discharge • Burning when urinating • Bleeding between periods <p>Infections that are not treated, even if there are no symptoms, can lead to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lower abdominal pain • Low back pain • Nausea • Fever • Pain during sex |
| Genital Herpes | <p>Some people may have no symptoms. During an “out-break,” the symptoms are clear:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small red bumps, blisters, or open sores where the virus entered the body, such as on the penis, vagina, or mouth • Vaginal discharge • Fever • Headache • Muscle aches • Pain when urinating • Itching, burning, or swollen glands in genital area • Pain in legs, buttocks, or genital area <p>Symptoms may go away and then come back. Sores heal after 2 to 4 weeks.</p> |
| Gonorrhea | <p>Symptoms are often mild, but most women have no symptoms. If symptoms are present, they most often appear within 10 days of becoming infected. Symptoms are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pain or burning when urinating • Yellowish and sometimes bloody vaginal discharge • Bleeding between periods • Pain during sex • Heavy bleeding during periods <p>Infection that occurs in the throat, eye, or anus also might have symptoms in these parts of the body.</p> |

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| STI | Symptoms |
|--|---|
| <p>Hepatitis B</p> | <p>Some women have no symptoms. Women with symptoms may have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-grade fever • Headache and muscle aches • Tiredness • Loss of appetite • Upset stomach or vomiting • Diarrhea • Dark-colored urine and pale bowel movements • Stomach pain • Skin and whites of eyes turning yellow |
| <p>HIV/AIDS</p> | <p>Some women may have no symptoms for 10 years or more. About half of people with HIV get flu-like symptoms about 3 to 6 weeks after becoming infected. Symptoms people can have for months or even years before the onset of AIDS include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fevers and night sweats • Feeling very tired • Quick weight loss • Headache • Enlarged lymph nodes • Diarrhea, vomiting, and upset stomach • Mouth, genital, or anal sores • Dry cough • Rash or flaky skin • Short-term memory loss <p>Women also might have these signs of HIV:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vaginal yeast infections and other vaginal infections, including STIs • Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) that does not get better with treatment • Menstrual cycle changes |
| <p>Human Papillomavirus (HPV)</p> | <p>Some women have no symptoms. Women with symptoms may have:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visible warts in the genital area, including the thighs. Warts can be raised or flat, alone or in groups, small or large, and sometimes they are cauliflower-shaped. • Growths on the cervix and vagina that are often invisible. |

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| STI | Symptoms |
|---|---|
| <p>Pubic Lice (sometimes called “crabs”)</p> | <p>Symptoms include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Itching in the genital area • Finding lice or lice eggs |
| <p>Syphilis</p> | <p>Syphilis progresses in stages. Symptoms of the primary stage are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A single, painless sore appearing 10 to 90 days after infection. It can appear in the genital area, mouth, or other parts of the body. The sore goes away on its own. <p>If the infection is not treated, it moves to the secondary stage. This stage starts 3 to 6 weeks after the sore appears. Symptoms of the secondary stage are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skin rash with rough, red or reddish-brown spots on the hands and feet that usually does not itch and clears on its own • Fever • Sore throat and swollen glands • Patchy hair loss • Headaches and muscle aches • Weight loss • Tiredness <p>In the latent stage, symptoms go away, but can come back. Without treatment, the infection may or may not move to the late stage. In the late stage, symptoms are related to damage to internal organs, such as the brain, nerves, eyes, heart, blood vessels, liver, bones, and joints. Some people may die.</p> |
| <p>Trichomoniasis (sometimes called “trich”)</p> | <p>Many women do not have symptoms. Symptoms usually appear 5 to 28 days after exposure and can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yellow, green, or gray vaginal discharge (often foamy) with a strong odor • Discomfort during sex and when urinating • Itching or discomfort in the genital area • Lower abdominal pain (rarely) |



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Q: How do you get tested for STIs?

A: There is no one test for all STIs. Ask your doctor about getting tested for STIs. She or he can tell you what test(s) you might need and how it is done. Testing for STIs is also called STI screening. Testing (or screening) for STIs can involve:

- Pelvic and physical exam — Your doctor can look for signs of infection, such as warts, rashes, discharge.
- Blood sample
- Urine sample
- Fluid or tissue sample — A swab is used to collect a sample that can be looked at under a microscope or sent to a lab for testing.

These methods are used for many kinds of tests. So if you have a pelvic exam and Pap test, for example, don't assume that you have been tested for STIs. Pap testing is mainly used to look for cell changes that could be cancer or precancer. Although a Pap test sample also can be used to perform tests for HPV, doing so isn't routine. And a Pap test does not test for other STIs. If you want to be tested for STIs, including HPV, you must ask.

You can get tested for STIs at your doctor's office or a clinic. But not all doctors offer the same tests. So it's important to discuss your sexual health history to find out what tests you need and where you can go to get tested.

Visit <http://www.hivtest.org/index.cfm> to find an STI testing site near you.

Q: Who needs to get tested for STIs?

A: If you are sexually active, talk to your doctor about STI screening. Which tests you might need and how often

depend mainly on your sexual history and your partner's. Talking to your doctor about your sex life might seem too personal to share. But being open and honest is the only way your doctor can help take care of you. Also, don't assume you don't need to be tested for STIs if you have sex only with women. Talk to your doctor to find out what tests make sense for you.

Visit <http://womenshealth.gov/prevention> to find out what screening tests you might need.

Q: How are STIs treated?

A: The treatment depends on the type of STI. For some STIs, treatment may involve taking medicine or getting a shot. For other STIs that can't be cured, like herpes, treatment can help to relieve the symptoms.

Only use medicines prescribed or suggested by your doctor. There are products sold over the Internet that falsely claim to prevent or treat STIs, such as herpes, chlamydia, human papillomavirus, and HIV. Some of these drugs claim to work better than the drugs your doctor will give you. But this is not true, and the safety of these products is not known.

Q: What can I do to keep from getting an STI?

A: You can lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps. The steps work best when used together. No single strategy can protect you from every single type of STI.

- **Don't have sex.** The surest way to keep from getting any STI is to practice abstinence. This means not having vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Keep



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in mind that some STIs, like genital herpes, can be spread without having intercourse.

- **Be faithful.** Having a sexual relationship with one partner who has been tested for STIs and is not infected is another way to lower your risk of getting infected. Be faithful to each other. This means you only have sex with each other and no one else.
 - **Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex.** Use condoms for all types of sexual contact, even if intercourse does not take place. Use condoms from the very start to the very end of each sex act, and with every sex partner. A male latex condom offers the best protection. You can use a male polyurethane condom if you or your partner has a latex allergy. For vaginal sex, use a male latex condom or a female condom if your partner won't wear a condom. For anal sex, use a male latex condom. For oral sex, use a male latex condom. A dental dam might also offer some protection from some STIs.
 - **Know that some methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.** If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom correctly every time you have sex.
 - **Talk with your sex partner(s) about STIs and using condoms before having sex.** It's up to you to set the ground rules and to make sure you are protected.
- **Don't assume you're at low risk for STIs if you have sex only with women.** Some common STIs are spread easily by skin-to-skin contact. Also, most women who have sex with women have had sex with men, too. So a woman can get an STI from a male partner and then pass it to a female partner.
 - **Talk frankly with your doctor and your sex partner(s) about any STIs you or your partner has or has had.** Talk about symptoms, such as sores or discharge. Try not to be embarrassed. Your doctor is there to help you with any and all health problems. Also, being open with your doctor and partner will help you protect your health and the health of others.
 - **Have a yearly pelvic exam.** Ask your doctor if you should be tested for STIs and how often you should be retested. Testing for many STIs is simple and often can be done during your checkup. The sooner an STI is found, the easier it is to treat.
 - **Avoid using drugs or drinking too much alcohol.** These activities may lead to risky sexual behavior, such as not wearing a condom.

Q: How do STIs affect pregnant women and their babies?

A: STIs can cause many of the same health problems in pregnant women as women who are not pregnant. But having an STI also can threaten the pregnancy and unborn baby's health. Having an STI during pregnancy can cause early labor, a woman's water to break early, and infection in the uterus after the birth.

