

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

An STI is an infection passed from one person to another person through sexual contact. STIs are also called sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs. STIs are usually spread by vaginal, oral, or anal sex. More than 9 million women in the United States are diagnosed with an STI each year. Women often have more serious health problems from STIs than men, including infertility.

Q: How do you get STIs?

A: STIs are spread in the following ways:

- Having unprotected (without a condom) vaginal, oral, or anal sex with someone who has an STI. It can be difficult to tell if someone has an STI. STIs can be spread even if there are no signs or symptoms.
- During genital touching. It is possible to get some STIs, such as syphilis and herpes, without having sex.
- Through sexual contact between women who have sex only with other women
- From a pregnant or breastfeeding woman to her baby

Q: Can STIs cause health problems?

A: Yes. Each STI causes different health problems for women. Certain types of untreated STIs can cause or lead to:

- Problems getting pregnant or permanent infertility
- Problems during pregnancy and health problems for the unborn baby
- Infection in other parts of the body

- Organ damage
- Certain types of cancer, such as cervical cancer
- Death

Q: What are the signs and symptoms of STIs?

A: Many STIs have only mild symptoms or no signs or symptoms at all. When women have symptoms, the symptoms may be mistaken for something else, such as a urinary tract infection or yeast infection. It is important to get tested so that you can be treated for the correct infection.

Q: Do I need to get tested for STIs?

A: If you are sexually active, talk to your doctor or nurse about STI testing. Which tests you will need and how often you need to get them will depend on you and your partner's sexual history.

Q: If I have an STI, does my partner have it too?

A: Maybe. If tests show that you have an STI, your doctor might want your partner to come in for testing. Or the doctor may give you a medicine to take home for your partner.

The STI may have spread to you or your partner from a former sex partner. This is why it is important to get tested after each new sex partner. Also, if you test positive for certain STIs (HIV, syphilis, or gonorrhea), some cities and states require you (or your doctor) to tell any past or current sex partners.

Q: How can I prevent an STI?

A: The best way to prevent an STI is to not have vaginal, oral, or anal sex.

If you do have sex, lower your risk of getting an STI with the following steps:

- **Get vaccinated.** There are vaccines to protect against HPV and hepatitis B.
- **Use condoms.** Condoms are the best way to prevent STIs when you have sex. Because a man does not need to ejaculate (come) to give or get some STIs, make sure to put the condom on before the penis touches the vagina, mouth, or anus. Other methods of birth control, such as birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms, will not protect you from STIs.
- **Get tested.** Be sure you and your partner are tested for STIs. Talk to each other about the test results before you have sex.
- **Be monogamous.** Having sex with just one partner can lower your risk for STIs. After being tested for STIs, be faithful to each other. That means that you have sex only with each other and no one else.
- **Limit your number of sex partners.** Your risk of getting STIs goes up with the number of partners you have.
- **Do not douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This may increase your risk of getting STIs.
- **Do not abuse alcohol or drugs.** Drinking too much alcohol or using drugs increases risky behavior and may put you at risk of sexual assault and possible exposure to STIs.

The steps work best when used together. No single step can protect you from every single type of STI.

For more information...

For more information on STIs, call the OWH Helpline at 800-994-9662 or contact the following organizations:

National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention (NCHHSTP), CDC, HHS
800-232-4636 • www.cdc.gov/nchhstp

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), NIH, HHS
866-284-4107 • www.niaid.nih.gov

American Sexual Health Association
800-227-8922 • www.ashastd.org

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Content last updated: August 31, 2015.

Content last reviewed: March 25, 2014.



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