

Patient Talk!



The International Council of Nurses
Informed Patient Project

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections that you can get through intimate or sexual contact with an infected person. Sometimes the infection can be transmitted through other activities, like sharing needles when injecting street drugs or needle-stick injuries at the workplace.

STIs can be caused by viruses or bacteria. Viral infections include hepatitis B, herpes, HIV, genital warts or human papillomavirus (HPV). Infections caused by bacteria include gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia or lymphogranuloma venereum (LGV).

Should I be concerned?

All STIs should be taken seriously. If left untreated, they can cause disease or physical damage. For example, chlamydia can lead to sterility, syphilis can cause heart damage or mental problems and HPV can lead to cancer of the cervix or penis.

STIs can aid in the transmission of HIV and other acute illnesses. HIV positive people infected with an additional STI are at a high risk for developing AIDS. Some STIs can be passed from a mother to an unborn child and cause birth defects or congenital disease.

How do I know if I've been infected?

Many STIs are difficult to detect because they are often transmitted without any visible sign or symptom. However, you may be at risk if you've already had sexual intercourse. Your risk may be higher if you have many sex partners, if your partner has many partners or if you have intercourse without using condoms.

Some common signs or symptoms of STIs can include the following:

- Itching around the vagina and/or discharge from the vagina;
- Discharge from the penis;
- Pain during sex, when urinating and/or in the pelvic area;
- Sore throats in people who have oral sex;
- Pain in the anus for people who have anal sex;
- Chancre sores (painless red sores) on the genital area, anus, tongue and/or throat;
- A scaly rash on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet;
- Dark urine, loose, light-colored stools, and yellow eyes and skin;
- Small blisters that turn into scabs on the genital area;
- Swollen glands, fever and body aches;
- Unusual infections, unexplained fatigue, night sweats and weight loss;
- Soft, flesh-colored warts around the genital area.

Source: American Academy of Family Physicians (2003). <http://familydoctor.org/165.xml?printxml>

I'm concerned, so what can I do?

Sometimes people are too embarrassed or frightened to ask for help or information. An important point to remember is that the earlier you seek help, the less likely you will have or pass on a disease to a loved one or, in the case of a woman, to a newborn. If you feel you're at risk for having an STI or if you've experienced any of the signs or symptoms mentioned above get medical help. Most STIs can be diagnosed following a medical examination and a culture of the secretions from the vagina or penis, or a blood test.



Treatment

If you are diagnosed with an STI, your health care professional may prescribe an antibiotic treatment. Many bacterial infections can be cured with antibiotics. There are, however, certain types of gonorrhea, such as when there is antimicrobial resistance, that do not respond to antibiotics.

Viral infections can be treated although not cured. Some treatments can control, reduce or eliminate symptoms caused by a virus. Despite these interventions, the virus still lives in the body and can be transmitted during sexual contact. Similarly, there is no cure for hepatitis B, although there are some cases where adults have recovered from the virus.

Vaccinations

Hepatitis B vaccines are recommended for people in high risk situations, such as injection drug users or health care workers. Hepatitis A vaccines are sometimes recommended for men who have sex with men and injection drug users. HPV vaccines have been developed, but are not yet available. These vaccines are showing great promise in protecting the public against certain types of HPV.

What is lymphogranuloma venereum or LGV?

LGV is an emerging disease caused by a different strain of Chlamydia. You can get LGV through unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex. It is more common among men who have sex with men. Symptoms can include painless genital ulcers, swollen lymph glands, rectal bleeding with mucous discharge and painful bowel movements. If left untreated, LGV can cause long-term problems. LGV can be treated and cured with antibiotics.

Prevention tips

The best way to prevent STIs is to know the basic facts and act responsibly. Avoiding sexual contact or limiting the number of sex partners can reduce the risk of developing STIs. A mutual monogamous relationship without any confirmed STI is safest.

With vaginal, anal and oral sex, male latex condoms should be used correctly and consistently. Female condoms are not as effective as male condoms, but should be used when a man is not using a male condom. Keep in mind that birth control methods such as pills, diaphragms and spermicides **do not** protect against STIs.

Talk about safe sex before engaging in sexual activity. You and your partner should check for any signs and symptoms that may indicate an STI. With any questionable or noticeable symptom, avoid sexual contact and seek medical help.

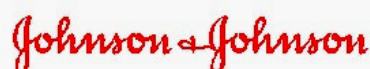
If you have more than one sex partner, you should obtain a medical check-up every six months to rule out the possibility of an STI. If you have a confirmed STI, you should notify your partners so that they can also be treated for the same infection. Abstinence should be practiced during the course of any treatment.

STI prevention and control can decrease your chances of becoming infected with HIV or other serious disease. Never share needles for injecting drugs, tattooing or body piercing. If you do share equipment, make sure that it is properly sterilized. Harm reduction or needle exchange programmes in your community can help you find the safest way to reduce the spread of STIs and HIV.

If you are pregnant and concerned, ask your health care professional for STI testing. Appropriate prenatal care and treatment can reduce the risk of transmitting an infection to your baby.

For more information on STIs please search the following sites:

AVERT: www.avert.org/stds.htm
 LA PublicHealth.Org. Department of Health Services: www.lapublichealth.org
 International Council of Nurses. HIV/AIDS in the European Union: www.icn.ch/matters.htm
 HivNet Nordic.org. The Nordic Resource Site.
 Teen Health Sexually Transmitted Diseases: www.hivnetnordic.org



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