

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Many people have STIs without being aware of it because they are often not symptomatic. This means that they may not feel any pain or discomfort.

STIs are important to know about because if they are not treated they can have very damaging effects such as chronic pain, infertility and cervical cancer. If you are pregnant and have an untreated STI the risk of infecting the baby with HIV and other infections increases.

It is now understood that the presence of an STI makes sexual transmission of HIV from one partner to another much more likely.

Protect yourself

It is important to protect yourself against STIs and practising safer sex and using condoms during penetrative sex is the only effective way to avoid STIs. STIs can really affect your health and may make HIV disease progress more rapidly.

Diagnosing

Diagnosing an STI if you have no symptoms is not easy in many countries as screening is not always widely available. However it is now recognised that screening for STIs and treating them is an effective way to slow down the numbers of new cases of HIV. This means that treatment is now increasingly being offered in ante natal clinics, maternal and child health clinics and family planning services.

If your partner has symptoms of an STI but you don't, you should still go and get treatment. Both partners should be treated if one has an STI, to avoid reinfection.

Treatment

Treatment of STIs can be fairly cheap and simple. Sometimes it is just one dose of antibiotics. However different infections need different treatments so it is important to get medical advice.

If you are pregnant or planning to get pregnant, it is important to have ante natal care and to treat and clear up any existing STIs. STIs can infect the baby at birth and cause serious damage. It is also important to tell your health practitioner if you are pregnant because this may affect the treatment you get.

STIs - what to look out for:

Although many women do not have symptoms you may have an STI if you have had sex and you notice:

- unusual bleeding from the vagina
- unusual stuff coming out of the vagina or your partner's penis ('discharge')
- sores, lumps or a rash on or around the vagina, anus or your partner's penis
- a burning feeling when you urinate
- itching around the vagina or anus or your partner feels it around the penis

If you have or suspect you have any STI you can seek advice and treatment at a health centre.

What about having sex if I am being treated for an STI?

With any STI the best way to avoid infection is to use condoms and practise safer sex every time you have sex. Avoiding oral sex during an outbreak of sores or blisters will reduce the risk of infection and also try to avoid touching any open sores, warts or blisters.

Some Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Chancroid

Chancroid is a bacterial infection which is common in tropical countries. It causes painful ulcers on the genitals. Chancroid can be identified by a laboratory test and cured with antibiotics.

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is an infection which affects the genitals. It is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. Most women have no symptoms. It can be treated simply once diagnosed, with antibiotics.

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is caused by bacteria and again many women will have no symptoms. Gonorrhoea is passed from one person to another through penetrative vaginal, anal, and oral sex. It is very easy to catch. It can also be passed on to babies during birth, causing eye infections and blindness. To diagnose gonorrhoea a swab is taken from the cervix, urethra or the throat. Treatment is usually with antibiotics. If you don't have treatment gonorrhoea can lead to Pelvic Inflammatory

Disease (PID) which can make it impossible to have a baby.

Genital Warts

Genital warts are small pinkish/white fleshy growths which may appear anywhere in the genital or anal area. They are caused by a virus called Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Women with untreated genital warts may be at increased risk of developing genital cancers.

Warts are spread through skin to skin contact. If you have unprotected vaginal or anal sex or genital contact with someone who has genital warts you may develop them.

After being infected with the wart virus it usually takes between one to three months for warts to appear on the genitals of women and men. They may itch but are usually painless. There are several methods used to treat genital warts. The most common one is to paint them with chemicals, which can be done either by your doctor or yourself. Other methods include freezing with liquid nitrogen, injecting them or burning off with a laser.

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It causes painful tingling or itching blisters or ulcers. Some people have aching muscles and fever.

Herpes Type I causes sores around the nose and mouth.

Herpes Type II causes sores or blisters around the genital and anal area.

Herpes is passed on through direct contact with the infected part of the person's body.

- Herpes sores on your mouth or your partner's mouth can infect the genital area of the other person
- Avoid sharing towels and wash cloths (face flannels) with partners, family members or friends. Unlike HIV, the herpes virus can be passed on in this way
- Always wash hands with soap after touching the sores.

Is there anything you can do to help yourself?

There are several things you can do to soothe the affected area:

- If the pain is severe, try taking pain killers (aspirin/paracetamol), if they are available
- Keep the affected area as dry and clean as possible. Try gently bathing the sore areas with a salt solution (half a teaspoon of salt to half a pint of warm water). You can add 5 drops of tea tree oil in warm salt water too. It may soothe and help dry up the sores
- Put gentian violet onto the sores to prevent secondary infection
- Honey applied to herpes sores will burn for a minute and then soothe and help to heal
- Take 50mg zinc and 500mg vitamin E daily from the moment the herpes pimple appears. (Taking 50mg zinc and 200mg vitamin E all the time helps to prevent re-occurrence of a herpes attack.)
- If you can get it Zovirax (Acyclovir) will shorten and ease a herpes attack. Take it with the zinc and vitamin E
- Wear loose clothing so that the air can circulate around the sore areas
- Place an ice pack wrapped in a clean cloth or towel on the affected area
- Get plenty of rest
- Drink plenty of fluids

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection. It is usually sexually transmitted through vaginal, anal or oral sex. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn baby.

The signs and symptoms are the same in both men and women and usually a sore appears on the penis or vagina, anus or mouth about ten days to three weeks after sex with an infected person. The sore disappears in a week or two but the bacteria remain in the body. However, most women do not see the sore and may not have any symptoms. The only way to be sure is to have a blood test.

During the secondary stage which may occur during the next two years a rash may appear on the hands and feet, the face and other parts of the body.

Treatment at any time during these first two stages of syphilis will cure the infection. But if it is left untreated a later stage will occur some years later which will cause very serious damage to your health.