

How to Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Frequently Asked Questions

- What are sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

STIs are infections transmitted through sexual contact. STIs are quite common and spread quickly. Some STIs are treatable and curable, whereas others are not. You can take steps to protect your health by understanding the facts.

- How do sexually transmitted infections (STIs) spread?

Anyone who has sexual contact with another person is at risk of contracting a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Some STIs have elicited symptoms, while others do not. Through touch with skin, genitals, mouth, rectum, or body fluids, a person with a STI might spread it to others. Contact through vaginal intercourse, anal sex, or oral sex is included. Your health can be harmed even if there are no symptoms.

- What are the symptoms of an STI?

Symptoms might range from slight discomfort and vaginal discharge to severe pain. Symptoms usually appear after the infection has been present for some time. In most situations, early treatment can prevent long-term health consequences.

- What causes STIs?

Infections with bacteria or viruses produce STIs. Antibiotics are used to treat STIs caused by bacteria. STIs produced by viruses are incurable, although their symptoms can be managed. Tests can be performed to determine infection even if there are no symptoms. Testing will reveal whether or whether you have a STI, allowing you to take actions to avoid spreading it to others.

- Who is at highest risk of STIs?

People are at high risk of getting STIs if they:

- Have or have had more than one sexual partner
- Have or have had a partner who has or has had more than one sexual partner
- Have sex with someone who has a STI
- Have a history of STIs
- Use intravenous drugs (drugs injected into a vein) or have a partner who uses intravenous drugs.

- How can I protect myself from STIs?

There are many options to reduce your risk of getting an STI:

- Know your sexual partners—The more sexual partners you or your partners have, the more likely you are to have a STI.
- Use a latex or polyurethane condom every time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex to lower the chance of infection.
- Recognize that some sex practices raise the risk of STIs— Sexual behaviors that rip or damage the skin increase the risk of STIs. Anal intercourse is dangerous because the tissues in the rectum are easily broken. STIs can also be transmitted through bodily secretions. An STI can be contracted by any unprotected sexual encounter with an infected person.
- Get vaccines—Vaccines against hepatitis B and the human papillomavirus are available (HPV).

- What are some of the most common STIs?

- Chlamydia (see [Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, and Syphilis](#))
- Gonorrhea (see [Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, and Syphilis](#))
- Genital herpes (see [Genital Herpes](#))
- Hepatitis B (see [Protecting Yourself Against Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C](#))
- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection (see [Testing for Human Immunodeficiency Virus](#))
- HPV infection (see [Human Papillomavirus \[HPV\] Vaccination](#))
- Syphilis (see [Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, and Syphilis](#))
- Trichomoniasis (see [Vaginitis](#))
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- What should I know about gonorrhea and chlamydia?

Gonorrhea and chlamydia are caused by bacteria. Even if there are no symptoms, these illnesses can have long-term impacts on fertility. Symptoms might arise anywhere from two to twenty-one days after contact with an infected person. These infections can occur simultaneously.

Symptoms of gonorrhea and chlamydia may include the following:

- Discharge from the vagina or penis
- Painful urination or the need to go more often
- Pain in the pelvis or abdomen
- Burning or itching in the vaginal area
- Redness or swelling of the vulva
- Bleeding between menstrual periods
- Sore throat with or without fever
- Swollen or enlarged lymph nodes

- What should I know about treatment for gonorrhea and chlamydia?

The most common treatment for gonorrhea is an antibiotic shot followed by antibiotic pills. Follow-up testing is frequently recommended by doctors to ensure that the infection is no longer present. Antibiotic pills are used to treat chlamydia. All your sex partners from the previous 60 days should be treated as well.

Pelvic inflammatory disease can be caused by untreated gonorrhea or chlamydia (PID). PID is a uterine, fallopian tube, and ovarian infection. Fever, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain are all symptoms of PID. Infertility and long-term pelvic pain are both possible outcomes of PID.

- What should I know about HPV?

HPV is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the United States. Some HPV types can be passed from one person to the next through sexual contact. Certain forms of HPV can induce cervical problems that can lead to cancer. HPV has also been related to anus, vulva, vaginal, penis, head, and neck cancers.

In most cases, HPV infection has no symptoms. However, genital warts can be caused by a few kinds of HPV and can appear on the genital area in any location. Warts can sometimes disappear on their own. If they don't, there are options for treatment. HPV can stay in the body for weeks or years after the warts have gone away, with no symptoms.

- Can HPV infection be prevented?

There is a vaccine available that can dramatically lower the risk of cancer, precancer, and genital warts. Although the vaccine is safe and efficient, it does not provide protection against all HPV types. This indicates that even if they have been vaccinated, women should follow cervical cancer screening protocols.

- How is the HPV vaccine given?

The HPV vaccine is provided in a series of doses. Girls and boys should be vaccinated against HPV at the age of 11 or 12, however it can be given at any age from 9 to 26. If you're above the age of 26, haven't been vaccinated, and are at risk of a new HPV infection, you and your doctor can discuss whether the HPV vaccination is right for you. The vaccine is safe for people up to the age of 45.

- What should I know about syphilis?

Syphilis is a bacterial infection. Syphilis bacteria enter the body through a cut in the skin or by encountering a partner's syphilis sore. Syphilis is most usually disseminated by sexual contact since it occurs on the vulva, vagina, anus, or penis. Syphilis, if left untreated, can lead to long-term health issues.

Symptoms of syphilis differ by stage:

- Primary stage—Syphilis manifests itself as a painless sore at first. Without care, this sore will disappear in 3 to 6 weeks.
- Secondary stage—If syphilis is not treated, the following stage begins while the sore heals or a few weeks after it has gone away. Rashes on the soles of the feet and palms of the hands, flat warts on the vulva, and flu-like symptoms are also possible symptoms at this stage.
- Latent infection—The rash and other symptoms may fade away in a few weeks or months for some people, but the infection is still present in their bodies. This is referred to as a latent infection.

- What should I know about treatment for syphilis?

Antibiotics are used to treat syphilis. The length of treatment is determined on the duration of the infection. Blood tests may be performed over time to evaluate if the treatment is effective. During therapy, avoid sexual intercourse. If you have syphilis, you should get tested for HIV as well. Syphilis should be treated in both you and your sex partners.

The symptoms of syphilis may go away without treatment, but the disease will not. It can resurface years later in its most severe form, causing heart problems, nervous system issues, paralysis, and blindness.

- What should I know about genital herpes?

In the United States, at least 50 million people—roughly one in every six adults—are infected with the virus that causes genital herpes. Although a herpes infection might result in painful sores, it is not always the case. It is possible to have herpes and be completely unaware of it.

A person with herpes may experience flu-like symptoms when first infected. Sores on the genitals, buttocks, and other places may look as tiny, fluid-filled blisters. Clusters of sores are common, and the area where the sores occur is generally inflamed and sensitive. Symptoms usually develop 2 to 10 days after the virus enters the body.

- What happens to the herpes virus in the body?

The virus gets to nerve cells near the spine stays there after a person is first infected. When a trigger is present, the virus can reactivate. Illness, stress, and hormonal changes are all potential triggers.

When the virus reactivates, it travels along the nerves back to the point where it first entered the body, causing fresh sores and blisters. This is referred to as a recurrence. During a recurrence, the infection might be passed on to others.

- What is the treatment for genital herpes?

Herpes is incurable; however the infection can be controlled. Antiviral drugs that used to treat outbreaks can make them last shorter and be less severe. Antiviral drugs, when used daily, can

help limit the number of outbreaks. Suppressive therapy is the term for this type of treatment. In some circumstances, suppressive therapy can prevent outbreaks for an extended period. This treatment also lowers the chance of spreading herpes to others.

- What should I know about HIV?

The virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is HIV. HIV is spread from person to person when infected body fluids, such as sperm, vaginal fluid, or blood, come into contact.

HIV targets the immune system after it has entered the body. As the immune system deteriorates, it becomes less capable of fighting disease and infection. When a person with HIV contracts diseases that the immune system would typically fight off, such as pneumonia, some types of cancer, and infections, AIDS is diagnosed.

- What are the symptoms of HIV infection?

Within 2 to 4 weeks of contracting the virus, some people may experience flu-like symptoms. Others, on the other hand, may not become ill until the illness has progressed to a more dangerous stage. Testing is the only method to find out if you have HIV.

- What should I know about treatment for HIV?

HIV infection cannot be cured, although it can be treated. There are drugs that can help HIV patients stay healthy for a long time. The sooner you begin treatment, the better your long-term health will be. Early treatment in addition to reliable and consistent condom use also lowers your chances of infecting your sex partners.

- What should I know about trichomoniasis?

Trichomoniasis is an infection spread through sex that is caused by a microscopic parasite. Treatment can help you get rid of it. Trichomoniasis affects many people without causing any symptoms. When symptoms do appear, they include vaginal discharge, as well as irritation and redness.

- What should I know about hepatitis?

Hepatitis is a virus infection of the liver. Hepatitis B and C are two kinds of hepatitis that can be spread sexually. They are spread through direct contact with an infected person's blood,

sperm, vaginal fluids, and saliva. Hepatitis B infection can be prevented with a vaccination. There is not a vaccine available that prevents Hepatitis C infection.

Many people who have been infected with hepatitis B or C can recover fully. Chronic liver infections, on the other hand, can cause long-term health difficulties in some people.

Glossary

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS): A group of signs and symptoms, usually of severe infections, in a person who has human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Antibiotics: Drugs that used to treat certain types of infections.

Anus: The opening of the digestive tract through which bowel movements leave the body.

Bacteria: single-celled organisms that can cause infections in the human body.

Cervix: The lower, narrow end of the uterus at the top of the vagina.

Fallopian Tubes: Tubes that transport an egg from the ovary to the uterus.

Genitals: The sexual or reproductive organs.

Hepatitis: Infection of the liver that can be caused by several types of viruses.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV): A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system. If left untreated, HIV can cause acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Human Papillomavirus (HPV): The name for a group of related viruses, some of which cause genital warts and some of which are linked to cancer of the cervix, vulva, vagina, penis, anus, mouth, and throat.

Immune System: The body's natural defensive system against disease-causing viruses and germs.

Infertility: The inability to get pregnant after 1 year of having regular sexual intercourse without the use of birth control.

Lymph Nodes: Small groups of special tissue that carry lymph, a liquid that bathes body cells. Lymph nodes are connected to each other by lymph vessels. Together, these make up the lymphatic system.

Menstrual Periods: The monthly shedding of blood and tissue from the uterus.

Ovaries: Organs in women that contain the eggs necessary to get pregnant and make important hormones, such as estrogen, progesterone, and testosterone.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID): An infection of the upper female genital tract.

Pelvis: The lower portion of the trunk of the body.

Penis: The male sex organ.

Pneumonia: An infection of the lungs.

Rectum: The last part of the digestive tract.

Semen: The fluid made by male sex glands that contains sperm.

Trichomoniasis: A type of vaginal infection caused by a parasite. This infection is passed through sex.

Uterus: A muscular organ in the female pelvis. During pregnancy, this organ holds and nourishes the fetus. Also called the womb.

Vagina: A tube-like structure surrounded by muscles. The vagina leads from the uterus to the outside of the body.

Viruses: Agents that cause certain types of infections.

Vulva: The external female genital area.

SOURCE: [How to Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\) | ACOG](#)