

# Sexually Transmitted Diseases

## What are sexually transmitted diseases?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections that pass from one person to another by sexual contact. Some of the more common STDs are chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, crab lice, syphilis, HPV and genital warts, trichomonas, HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), and hepatitis A, B, and C. Some of these diseases are more dangerous than others. Some can be cured with antibiotics, but for others, like herpes or HIV, there is no cure. Some can make you very sick. In severe cases, they can cause death.

You can have one of these diseases and not know it because you don't have any symptoms and don't feel sick. You can then spread the disease to sexual partners. Or you may think or know that you have an STD but are too embarrassed to talk about it with your sexual partner. Sexual partners are at risk for getting the disease if you don't practice safe sex every time.

STDs can cause especially severe health problems for women than men. They can make it hard for a woman to get pregnant. They can also increase the risk that a woman will have a tubal pregnancy, which can be very dangerous. Also, STDs can spread from a pregnant mother to her baby and cause serious problems or death. Some infections may increase the risk for early labor and premature birth.

## What is the cause?

Bacteria, viruses, and parasites cause STDs. They are usually passed between partners during sex. This includes vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse, oral-genital contact (oral sex), skin-to-skin contact in the genital area, kissing, and the use of sex toys, such as vibrators. Hepatitis B and HIV can also spread through IV drug use.

## What are the symptoms?

STDs may not cause symptoms until years after you are infected. Possible symptoms are:

- Burning or pain when urinating
- Unusual discharge from the vagina or penis
- Itching, burning, or pain around the vagina, penis, or rectum
- Rashes, sores, blisters, or painless growths around the vagina, penis, or rectum
- Pain with sex
- Sore throat
- Vaginal bleeding between menstrual periods

HIV infection can cause flulike symptoms.

## How are they diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask about your symptoms and medical history. Your provider will examine you. You may have tests, such as blood or urine tests.

## How are they treated?

Some STDs can be cured with antibiotic medicine, especially when they are diagnosed and treated early. There is no cure for STDs caused by a virus, like herpes, HIV, HPV, and genital warts. However, treatment of these infections can lessen or avoid complications.

If you cannot afford to pay for treatment, most communities have an STD clinic or county health department where visits are free of charge or cost a very small amount.

And remember, you can get the same STD again, even if you have had it once and have been treated.

## How can I take care of myself?

Don't be embarrassed or afraid to seek care or ask for information. STD checks are a part of routine care at most medical offices and clinics.

Remember that getting treatment early can prevent complications. It can also keep you from spreading the disease to your partner. Make sure that you carefully follow your healthcare provider's treatment plan.

## How can I help prevent STDs?

To protect yourself from sexual diseases, the only absolutely risk-free activity is to not have sex. This includes not having vaginal sex, anal sex, or oral sex.

If you are sexually active, here are some steps you should take to lower your risk of getting infected:

- Have sex with only 1 person who does not have an infection and who is not having sex with anyone else.
- Practice safer sex. Always use latex or polyurethane condoms during any sexual contact. Using condoms reduces the risk of infection for some STDs. However, condoms do not provide full protection against genital warts, syphilis, and herpes. They also do not protect against infections that can be spread with oral-anal sex. Never use the same condom more than once.

Some STDs can be prevented by a vaccine.

- The **HPV** vaccine prevents types of HPV (human papillomavirus) infection that are high risk for genital warts and cancer of the cervix. HPV shots are approved for females and males aged 9 to 26. It's best to get the HPV shot before you have any sexual activity.
- Shots that prevent **Hepatitis B** infection have been given to newborns in the US since the early 1990s. You should get the shots if you did not get them as a baby and are 12 to 24 years old or at risk of infection. A shot to protect against

**hepatitis A** is also available for people at risk (for example, men who have sex with men).

If you are sexually active, **always use a condom** and have regular checkups for STDs, especially if you are having sex with a new partner. If you think you might have an STD or may have been exposed to an STD, get checked by your healthcare provider before you have sex again.

You can get more information from:

- Your healthcare provider or the health department
- A family planning or STD clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control (CDC)  
1-800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636)  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std>

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