

## What You Should Know About Sexually Transmitted Infections

**C**ould you or your sexual partner have a sexually transmitted infection (STI)? Are you sure? There are about 25 different STIs that affect more than 19 million women and men yearly in the United States, and you cannot always tell if you or your sexual partner(s) are infected.

### What Is an STI?

The term STI refers to infections that are transferred from one person to another during sexual contact including oral, vaginal, or anal intercourse; kissing; or mouth to genital (penis, vulva, or vagina) contact. You may also have heard other terms for these infections: sexually transmitted diseases, or their older name, venereal diseases.

Nearly half of all STIs occur among adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 24 years. Some—chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis—are caused by bacteria. One common STI, trichomoniasis, is caused by a parasite. Because antibiotics kill both bacteria and parasites, these STIs can be cured. Others—genital herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)—are caused by viruses. Because there are no current medications that are able to kill viruses, these STIs can be treated, but not cured.

Sexually transmitted infections can cause symptoms, but it is possible, and even common to have STIs without noticing anything out of the ordinary. Since some STIs have serious consequences, researchers are trying hard to find reliable, easily used ways to prevent them. They have had one small success: A vaccine to prevent hepatitis B, a viral STI, has been available for years and is currently being given to all children in

the United States as part of their regular “baby shots.” The most promising measure in current STI research is microbicides—chemicals used in the vagina or rectum before or after sex to kill bacteria and viruses before they cause damage. Several microbicides are under development but must still undergo more tests to make sure they work and have no harmful effects on the user.

### Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, Syphilis, and HPV: Special Concerns for Women

The following STIs are particularly important for women to know about because they can cause serious harm to the reproductive tract, or to a developing baby.

**Chlamydia.**—This STI infects the cervix (mouth of the uterus) and the urethra (tube that leads urine out of the bladder when you urinate), but can also live in the throat or rectum. The infection can go up into the lining of the uterus, ovaries, and tubes, causing pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), and can lead to chronic pelvic pain, a tubal pregnancy, or infertility (inability to become pregnant). Chlamydia can be cured with antibiotics taken by mouth.

**Gonorrhea.**—Also a curable bacterial STI, gonorrhea is similar to chlamydia. It has no symptoms in more than half of the women who have it, and it can cause PID, tubal blockage, and infertility. Up to four

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out of every 10 women who have gonorrhea also have chlamydia, so women diagnosed with or suspected of having gonorrhea are usually treated for chlamydia as well. Gonorrhea is typically treated with an injection (shot) of an antibiotic, plus pills to treat possible chlamydia.

**Syphilis.**—Syphilis is spread by bacteria that get into the bloodstream through breaks in the skin.

While it is less common in women than chlamydia or gonorrhea, it is detrimental to infected pregnant

women, who can pass syphilis on to their babies, causing death or serious birth defects. Over many years, untreated syphilis can infect the brain, heart, and other internal organs. Syphilis is curable with penicillin injections.

**HPV.**—This STI is caused by a virus and should be of particular concern to women since some strains

of the virus cause cervical cancer. Fortunately, Papanicolaou (Pap) smears can detect HPV and abnormal cells that can develop into cancer. There is also a DNA test available to detect signs of HPV. Treatment prevents the abnormal cells from turning into cancerous cells. Women with HPV should have regular Pap smears according to the timetable their health care provider recommends.

### Preventing STIs

Women need to rely on themselves for STI protection. If you choose to have sex with another person, deciding to protect yourself from STIs should be part of the choice.

Going to a health care provider with your partner before having sex and “getting tested for everything” may help prevent STIs. It is a good idea to

visit your health care provider for accurate information and appropriate testing, but you should know that this is no guarantee. Some STIs do not even have efficient screening methods, and no test for any infection is 100% accurate.

In an ideal world, all women would talk to their partners about STI protection before having sex. In the real world this does not happen, but that does not mean it is too late. Talk with your partner about your expectations that he will use a latex condom correctly, every time, and that he will not have other partners. Keep condoms on hand, and decide in advance how to avoid situations where drugs, alcohol, or partner pressure will affect your good judgment. If your partner will not use condoms and you still choose to have sex, start using female condoms. Both male and female condoms may be available free or at low cost at STI or family planning clinics. For help, visit <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/birthcontrol/pub-condom.xml>.

Sexually transmitted infections may be spread between female partners as well as between a male and a female. Although not much research is available in this area, infections are probably spread by one partner touching her own vagina and then her partner's, or by sharing sex toys. Female partners should wash their hands or use latex gloves between contact with their own and their partner's vaginas. Sex toys should be washed or covered with a latex condom if being shared between partners.

If you have a new sexual partner, have had unprotected sex, or have unusual symptoms—a vaginal discharge, sores, or new lumps or bumps around the genitals—see your health care provider. At any medical visit, even if it includes a Pap smear, don't assume you are automatically being tested for STIs. If you want testing, ask.

### In Summary

When you choose to have sex with another person, you take the risk of getting STIs, some of which have serious health consequences. Since there is no way to know for sure if you or a potential partner is infected, be realistic and protect yourself.

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*This Patient Handout was prepared by Diane E. Judge, APN/CNP, using materials from: Simon V, Wider W. Sexually Transmitted Infections in Women: An Overview. The Female Patient. 30(8):51-56.*

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### Resources

- **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**  
<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/pp2/portal/files/portal/medicalinfo/sti/pub-sti-facts-1.xml>
- **The American Social Health Association**  
<http://www.ashastd.org/>