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Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Overview

What are sexually transmitted infections?

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections you can get by having sex with someone who has an infection. These infections are usually passed from person to person through vaginal intercourse, but they can also be passed through anal sex, oral sex or skin-to-skin contact. STIs can be caused by viruses or bacteria. STIs caused by viruses include hepatitis B, herpes, HIV and the human papilloma virus (HPV). STIs caused by bacteria include chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis.

How do I know if my partner has an STI?

Ask. Although it may be uncomfortable, talk to your partner before having any sexual contact. Ask if he or she is at risk for having an STI. Some of the risk factors are having sex with several partners, using injected drugs and having had an STI in the past. To be safe, protect yourself no matter what the person says. You must also tell your partner if you have an STI. You aren't doing yourself or your partner any favors by trying to hide it.

Symptoms

What are some of the common signs/symptoms of STIs?

- Itching around the vagina and/or discharge from the vagina for women
- Discharge from the penis for men
- Pain during sex or when urinating
- Pain in the pelvic area
- Sore throats in people who have oral sex
- Pain in or around 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

Causes & Risk Factors

Am I at risk for having an STI?

If you've ever had sex, you may be at risk for having an STI. Your risk is higher if you have had many sex partners, have had sex with someone who has had many partners or

have had sex without using condoms.

Diagnosis & Tests

How are STIs diagnosed?

Most STIs can be diagnosed through an exam by your doctor, a culture of the secretions from your vagina or penis, or through a blood test.

Treatment

Can STIs be cured?

Some can. STIs that are caused by bacteria, like chlamydia, can be cured with antibiotics. But STIs caused by a virus (like HIV or herpes) can't be cured. Your doctor can only treat the symptoms that the virus causes.

Don't wait to be treated. Early treatment helps prevent serious health problems. Even if medicine can't completely cure the STI, it can help keep you from getting really sick. If you are given medicine for an STI, take it exactly as the doctor says.

Complications

Should I be checked for STIs?

See your doctor if you're at risk for having an STI, if you have any of the symptoms, or if you have concerns about whether you have one. STIs can cause serious health problems if left untreated.

For example, chlamydia can lead to problems that can cause women not to be able to have children (infertility). HPV can lead to cancer of the cervix or penis, and syphilis can lead to paralysis, mental problems, heart damage, blindness and even death.

Prevention

Can STIs be prevented?

Yes. The only sure way to prevent STIs is by not having sex. If you have sex, you can lower your risk of getting an STI by only having sex with someone who isn't having sex with anyone else and who doesn't have an STI.

You should always use condoms when having sex, including oral and anal sex.

Do condoms prevent STIs?

Male latex condoms can reduce your risk of getting an STI if used correctly (see the box below). Be sure to use them every time you have sex. Female condoms aren't as effective as male condoms, but should be used when a man won't use a male condom.

Remember, though, that condoms aren't 100% safe and can't protect you from coming in contact with some sores (such as those that can occur with herpes) or warts (which can be caused by HPV infection).

How to use male condoms

- Put the condom on before any contact is made.
- Unroll the condom over an erect penis to the base of the penis. (Uncircumcised men should pull back their foreskin before unrolling.) The unrolled ring should be on the outside. Leave about 1/2 inch of space in the tip so semen can collect there. Squeeze the tip to get the air out.
- Pull out after ejaculating and before the penis gets soft. To pull out, hold the rim of the condom at the base of the penis to make sure it doesn't slip off.
- Don't reuse condoms.

How to use female condoms

- Follow the directions on the condom package for correct placement. Be sure the inner ring goes as far into the vagina as it can. The outer ring stays outside the vagina.
- Guide the penis into the condom.
- After sex, remove the condom before standing up by gently pulling it out.
- Don't reuse condoms.

What else should I do to prevent STIs?

Limit the number of sex partners you have. Ask your partner if he or she has, or has had, an STI and tell your partner if you have had one. Talk about whether you've both been tested for STIs and whether you should be tested.

Look for signs of an STI in your sex partner. But remember that STIs don't always cause symptoms. Don't have sex if you or your partner are being treated for an STI.

Wash your genitals with soap and water and urinate soon after you have sex. This may help clean away some germs before they have a chance to infect you.

Should I use a spermicide to help prevent STIs?

No. It was once thought that spermicides with nonoxynol-9 could help prevent STIs much like they help prevent pregnancy -- by damaging the organisms that cause the diseases. New research has shown that nonoxynol-9 can irritate a woman's vagina and cervix, actually increasing the risk of STI infection.

Be sure to check the ingredients of any other sex-related products you own, such as lubricants and condoms. Some brands of these products may have nonoxynol-9 added to them. If you are unsure if your spermicide or any other product contains nonoxynol-9, ask your doctor before using it.

Other Organizations

- [American Social Health Organization](#)
- [I Wanna Know](#)
- [Medline Plus STI Information](#)
- [CDC National STI Hotline](#)

- [Herpes Resource Center](#)
- [CDC HPV Vaccine Information](#)
- [HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service](#)
- [Planned Parenthood](#)
- [National STD Hotline](#)
800-227-8922
- [National AIDS Hotline](#)
- [National AIDS Hotline](#)
800-344-7432 (Spanish)

Questions to Ask Your Doctor

- What treatment is best for me?
- Do I have a viral or bacterial STI?
- Is it possible to have sex with my boyfriend/girlfriend without giving him/her my STI?
- How can I stop from getting an STI?
- If I have one STI, am I at higher risk of getting another?
- How long will my treatment last?
- Are there any side effects of my treatment?
- Are there any support groups in my area?
- If my symptoms get worse, when should I call my doctor?

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Reviewed/Updated: 04/14

Created: 01/00