



WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT STDs

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are passed from person to person through sexual contact. STDs are currently epidemic among Americans; especially those aged 15 to 34. STDs can cause serious health problems, infertility, and even death.

The most common symptoms of STDs are:

- An abnormal discharge or fluid from the vagina or penis.
- Painful or burning urination.
- Any kind of sore, bump or blister—which may or may not be painful—on or near the genitals.
- Itching in the genital or rectal area.
- Abnormal bleeding or unusually severe menstrual cramps in women.
- Pain in the lower abdomen in women, or pain during intercourse.

If you develop any of these problems, see a physician or go to a clinic for diagnosis and treatment. Even if the problem seems to go away by itself, you still should be checked.

Protecting Yourself and Others

The following “safer sex” guidelines can help protect you and your partner against STDs:

- Use condoms with spermicide. Condoms offer the best protection against STDs. Condoms containing spermicide may increase protection because spermicide can kill viruses and bacteria.
- Limit your sexual partners; the more sexual partners you have, the greater your chance of acquiring an STD. A long-term relationship between two people who have no other sexual partners is the best protection.
- Examine your genitals regularly for sores, bumps, blisters or discharge.
- Have a frank discussion about STDs with a new partner before having sexual contact. This is difficult but necessary. It is particularly important to discuss with your partner the following risky behaviors:
 - Multiple current or previous sexual partners
 - Previous history of or exposure to STDs
 - IV drug use
 - Lack of condom use
 - Tattoos and body piercing
- Consider testing for STDs before starting a new relationship, particularly if there are concerns about risky behavior.
- Consider vaccination for Hepatitis B if you haven't already done so.
- Avoid sexual contact if an STD is suspected. If either partner has or suspects an STD, both partners should be examined and treated. Avoid sexual contact during treatment until a test confirms that you are cured.
- Seek treatment if you have any of the STD signs listed above.

GENITAL HERPES

Millions of people carry the virus that causes genital herpes, but some of these people have no symptoms or such mild symptoms that they are unaware they are infected. However, these carriers can still pass herpes to their sexual partners.



The initial episode of genital herpes usually develops five to ten days after exposure through sexual contact with an infected person. One or several small, painful blisters may appear on the penis, vulva (the exterior of the vagina) or rectal area. Fever, headache, fatigue and swollen lymph glands may develop. The first episode is usually the most severe. Subsequent attacks are generally limited to genital sores lasting 4 to 10 days.

Patients with genital herpes may suffer from recurring episodes. Some have recurrences only once or twice a year, while others may have monthly recurrences. Treatment with prescription antiviral medications can prevent recurrences or reduce their severity, frequency and duration.

People with herpes should avoid sexual contact when sores are present. Herpes can, however, be transmitted even when there are no sores; therefore, a condom should always be used during sexual contact.

Herpes does not pose any serious health risk to adults, but can be dangerous for infants who become infected during birth. When a pregnant woman has genital herpes, Cesarean delivery is sometimes performed to prevent transmission to the newborn. Women should be very careful to avoid getting herpes during pregnancy.

GENITAL WARTS

Genital warts are caused by the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus (HPV). The often cauliflower-shaped warts appear most commonly on the penis, vulva (exterior of the vagina), cervix, vagina or anus. Genital warts usually develop one to three months after exposure (sometimes longer). The warts are dry, firm, and painless and can be large or small, flat or raised. However, many genital papillomavirus infections cause no visible warts.

Genital warts pose no immediate health risk, but should be treated because they can infect sexual partners. In addition, some types of human papillomavirus have been linked to the development of cervical cancer in women. Untreated warts often spread, particularly in pregnant women.

There are several treatments for genital warts. The warts can be frozen, burned off, or treated with a caustic chemical by your doctor. Recurrence of genital warts is common. **Anyone who has had this infection should have regular checkups, including annual pap smears.**

GONORRHEA

The symptoms of gonorrhea usually appear two to five days after sexual contact with an infected person. Symptoms include a thick, creamy white discharge from the penis or vagina, and urination may be painful. Women sometimes have unusual vaginal bleeding, such as bleeding after intercourse or bleeding between periods. Pain in the lower abdomen can occur in women and is a sign of serious infection.

Many women and men infected with gonorrhea have no symptoms, particularly in its early stages. For example, the first sign of infection for a woman may be her partner's complaints of discharge or burning with urination. Because so many infected people show no symptoms, a doctor might suggest treatment for you if your partner has symptoms and you do not.

Antibiotics can cure gonorrhea. Untreated gonorrhea can have serious health consequences. In men, the infection can spread to the testicles. In women, the infection can move into the fallopian tubes causing pelvic inflammatory disease, one of the most common causes of infertility in women.

CHLAMYDIA

Symptoms of chlamydia usually develop 7 to 14 days after exposure. Chlamydia symptoms are similar to those of gonorrhea. The first symptom in men is a clear or white discharge from the penis. Sometimes urination is painful. The most common symptom among women is an increased vaginal discharge. Other symptoms include painful urination, abnormal vaginal bleeding, bleeding after sex, and lower abdominal pain. However, many people have no symptoms unless the infection is very advanced.

Untreated Chlamydia in women can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which can cause infertility and often requires hospitalization. Untreated men may develop infected testicles. Chlamydia can be effectively treated with antibiotics.

AIDS

AIDS is spread through unprotected oral, anal or vaginal sexual contact with an infected partner, IV drug use with contaminated needles, infected blood or blood products, and by infected women to their unborn children. Genital ulcer diseases such as syphilis and herpes may also increase the risk of spreading AIDS.

AIDS causes a breakdown of the immune system. Although the AIDS virus can lay dormant for years, severe infections can eventually develop. People infected with the AIDS virus develop antibodies in their blood. Testing for the AIDS virus is readily available.

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is not spread by casual contact. You cannot get AIDS by hugging, touching, sharing utensils with or breathing the same air as a person with AIDS. Antiviral medications are effective in many patients in slowing the course of AIDS, and it is no longer the “death sentence” it used to be.

HEPATITIS B

Hepatitis B is an infection of the liver caused by the Hepatitis B virus. Hepatitis B is spread in the same ways as the AIDS virus (see above), but it also can be acquired by casual contact.

Acute Hepatitis B is usually a mild, flu-like illness, but occasionally can be severe or life threatening. Some people become chronically infected, which can cause liver inflammation with increased risk of liver failure and liver cancer. Some people infected with this disease may show no symptoms but can still spread the disease to others.

There is no cure for Hepatitis B, but a safe, effective vaccine is available. It is now given as a routine childhood immunization.

SYPHILIS

The first sign of this increasingly common STD is usually the appearance of a painless sore called a chancre (pronounced “shanker”) in the genital or rectal area. The chancre develops two to six weeks after exposure. Painless swollen lymph glands in the groin area are also a common early symptom. Early infection often goes undetected.

If initial infection is not treated, the disease can progress to a highly infectious secondary stage. The most common symptoms then include various kinds of skin rashes. If still untreated, the disease enters a dormant stage and can progress months or even decades later to a possibly fatal third stage.

Infants born to women with syphilis are often premature, face a high risk of death if untreated, and often have severe medical problems.

Fortunately, syphilis can be effectively treated with antibiotics. The earlier syphilis is treated, the better.

We have more detailed handouts on several of these topics. Please ask for them if you would like more information.

