

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

Do you know the facts?



Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections (sometimes called STIs) are infections that can be passed from one person to another person during sexual activity. There are over 30 different infections that can be passed on sexually. Some of these really can only be passed on during sex, some can be passed on in other ways and some develop in our own bodies and then can be passed on sexually.

STIs can be passed on through vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex, mutual masturbation/ fingering or by sharing sex toys with someone who has an infection. So basically they can affect anyone who is sexually active – whether you're straight, lesbian, gay or bisexual.

At best, STIs can cause discomfort, embarrassment and irritation. They can, however, have longer-term effects on our health including infertility (unable to have children), life-long illnesses or even, in some cases, lead to death.

Some STIs that can cause long-term damage to our bodies can sometimes have no symptoms at all.

Signs and symptoms

So, how would we know if we had an STI? Well, for some people there may be obvious symptoms that tell us that something is not right.

These symptoms may include:

- Rashes and itchiness around the genital area, (the penis or vagina) the anus (bottom) or on our skin
- A smelly or unusual discharge from the penis or vagina
- Pain when going to the toilet
- Pain when having sex
- Lumps, sores and growths around the genitals, in and around the anus or in the mouth

But, there may be no symptoms at all and an STI may still be present which is silently causing damage to your body. And you could pass this infection on to someone else.

Bacterial Infections

Bacteria are very small single-celled life forms that live in and around us and can reproduce very quickly. While not all bacteria are harmful (in fact our bodies need some types of good bacteria to survive) some cause disease and illness. In order to survive and develop, most bacteria use organic matter – that's our bodies - as food and warmth. Therefore, if we think about the warm, moist parts of our bodies (the vulva, vagina, penis, rectum and throat) they are the ideal places for bacteria to thrive and grow.

So, if we have a bacterial STI, such as **Chlamydia**, **Gonorrhoea** and **Syphilis**, we can pass this onto someone else through vaginal, anal and oral sex – as well as from any genital contact and sharing sex toys.

Having the correct dose of the right kind of antibiotics can usually cure bacterial infections. If untreated, **Syphilis** can cause major long-term damage to our bodies and **Chlamydia** could cause damage that can make it difficult to get pregnant in future.

Parasitic Infections

A parasite is an animal or plant that lives in or on a host (another animal or plant). They obtain nourishment from the host without benefiting or killing the host.

Parasitic infections that can be passed sexually can also be passed on in other ways e.g. sharing towels and bedding, but getting close and intimate with someone who has one of these infections is an ideal way for a parasite to move from one person to another.

Examples of parasitic STIs are **Pubic Lice (crabs)**, **Scabies** and **Threadworm**.

Although getting any of these parasites from sexual contact with an infected person can be very distressing, these infections can easily be treated with lotions or tablets that can be bought over the counter at chemists or on prescription from your doctor or sexual health clinic.

Viral Infections

A virus is an infectious agent that invades and takes over cells within our bodies and cause disease and illness. There are many forms of viral infections that can be passed from one person to another – measles, mumps, influenza, chickenpox etc. Some viral infections are classed as STIs because this is the way they are mainly contracted

Viral STIs include **Genital Warts**, **Herpes** (like cold sores but around the genitals), **HIV** and **Viral Hepatitis**.

If we have warts or blisters in the genital area, a doctor or nurse can treat these. However, once infected the virus will remain in our body and we may have future outbreaks of warts and herpes blisters that may need further treatment. Warts especially would need retreating if they come back.

HIV and Viral Hepatitis are more serious as they can lead to life long illness that needs a lot of medical treatment and support.

A vaccination is available to protect against infection from Hepatitis A and B. Contact your local GUM clinic for more details.

Fungal and other infections

Some fungal infections can develop in the genital area. The most common of these is an infection called **Thrush**.

Your chance of developing genital fungal infections may be increased:

- by taking antibiotics
- from restricted airflow to the genitals by wearing tight underwear / clothes or synthetic fabrics
- by vaginal douching (washing) with perfumed bath products
- if you have diabetes or are pregnant

and for men

- from not washing under the foreskin

Some fungal infections can be passed on sexually – these include Thrush, Jock Itch (like athletes foot, but around the genitals) and Balanitis (inflammation of the end of the penis).

There are a number of creams, lotions and tablets available from your chemist, doctor or sexual health clinic that can help clear up or reduce the symptoms of fungal infections.

Some women may develop an infection called Bacterial Vaginosis (BV). This causes irritation and discomfort around the vagina and can produce an unpleasant fishy smell. BV may sometimes pass to sexual partners – in men it causes infection under the foreskin.

Getting tested and treated

There are many different types of STIs as well as a host of other infections that can affect our genital areas. These can affect us in different ways and produce different symptoms and some have no symptoms at all.

If you think that you may have an infection, then the best way to get the right diagnosis and treatment is to go to your local sexual health clinic (sometimes called **G U Clinics**)

In fact it is recommended that anyone who is sexually active should have regular sexual health check up. Most of us go to the dentist for a regular check up and most of us get our cars regularly serviced to make sure they are running well – so why not make sure our sexual bits and bobs are in fine working order?

Lots of things may get in the way of us going to a sexual health clinic. We may be embarrassed at the thought of a doctor or nurse examining our genitals, think that the tests will be painful or maybe worried about other people knowing we have been to a sexual health clinic. We may hope the problem goes away by itself – it won't.

If you go to a sexual health clinic, it will be completely confidential and the staff are specialists who will try their best to make you feel comfortable and at ease. As to the thought of painful tests, some may be uncomfortable for a second or two but they don't hurt – in fact, many tests are now done from urine or blood samples.

There is no need to be ashamed or embarrassed if you think you may have an STI. It happens to lots of people – they are one of the most common infections you can get.

Making Sex Safer

- You can help to avoid getting many STIs by having safer sex – that's using a condom for vaginal, anal and oral sex.
- There are many different types of condom available and condoms are free from all sexual health clinics.
- If used correctly and consistently, condoms can be an effective barrier to many STIs including chlamydia, gonorrhoea and HIV. For straight couples, they can also help stop unwanted pregnancies.
- Sex should be pleasurable and fun. Knowing that we are protecting ourselves and our partners from STIs can take away some of the worries about sex so that we can relax and enjoy it more!

Where to go for help and support about sexually transmitted infections

You can get information about testing and treatment of STIs from any sexual health clinic – contact NHS Direct on 0845 46 47 to find the clinic nearest to where you live.

Your local clinic is: