

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and HIV

What is an STI?

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) or Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) are infections that can pass from one person to another through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Some STIs can even be picked up through close bodily contact alone.

Who can get an STI?

The most important thing to remember about STIs is that anybody who is having sex can get them: if you are young or old, male or female, heterosexual, gay or lesbian you have an equal chance of getting and passing on an STI. You also don't need to have had lots of sexual partners for this to happen.

What different types of STI are there?

There are over twenty-five different types of STI. Some of the most common infections are:

- Chlamydia
- Gonorrhoea
- Genital Warts
- Herpes
- Syphilis
- HIV
- Pubic Lice
- Hepatitis B

The good news is that most sexually transmitted infections (apart from HIV) can be treated quickly and easily if they are discovered early on. If an STI is left untreated it can eventually become painful and uncomfortable and it can also cause long-term health problems, such as infertility in women, heart and brain damage, and possibly death. It is also important to remember that having an untreated STI can put a person at a greater risk of getting or passing on HIV.

What causes STIs?

STIs are caused by viruses, bacteria and parasites. For instance, herpes and genital warts are caused by viruses, whilst bacteria cause chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis. Pubic lice are caused by parasites.

How will I know if I have an STI?

If you have a sexually transmitted infection you may get symptoms which show that something is wrong, **but often there aren't any symptoms at all**. Not everyone who has an STI gets symptoms, and some infections have no clear signs. Other infections can have symptoms that come and go even though the infection is still there.

Sometimes you can even have more than one infection at one time. That's why it is really important that you get medical advice straight away if you've had unprotected sex and you think you might have got an infection – even if you don't seem to have any symptoms. The most common symptoms of an STI are:

- Unusual discharge of liquid from the vagina or penis – it could be **thick** or **watery, cloudy, white, green** or **yellow**. It might be smelly.
- **Pain or burning** when you pass urine.
- **Itching, rashes, lumps, ulcers** or **sores** on or around the genitals or anus.
- **Pain** in the genitals.
- **Pain** in the abdominal or groin area.
- **Bleeding** after sex.
- **Pain and/or bleeding** during sex.
- **Pain** in the testicles.

Even if you don't have any signs and/symptoms you may also wish to seek advice or have a check-up particularly if:

- You have had unprotected sex with a new partner recently.
- You or your sexual partner has sex with other people without using a condom.
- Your sexual partner has any symptoms.

Symptoms can usually appear within two to fourteen days, but they can take up to four weeks (sometimes even longer). In the case of HIV infection, there are no symptoms – perhaps for many years. After infection, it takes 3 months before the test for HIV can work.

How do you catch an STI?

The usual way is through **sex**. Semen, vaginal fluid and blood can all carry an infection.

The man does not have to ejaculate to infect a partner. A small amount of semen can leave the penis before or without ejaculation, and can be just as infectious. You also don't need to have 'full sex' to get an STI. Some infections can be passed from person to person by genital contact alone (when the penis just touches the vulva or vagina). STIs such as herpes can also be passed from person to person through oral sex (when you lick or kiss your partners genitals). For infections like pubic lice – which are crawling insect-like creatures – skin contact alone is enough.

Common STIs and Their Treatment

HIV and AIDS

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is a virus that weakens the immune system and leaves people open to unusual illness and cancers that would not normally be a threat. These infections are called 'opportunistic infections' and include respiratory infections such as tuberculosis, gastro-intestinal infections such as

diarrhoea or thrush in the mouth and brain infections such as toxoplasmosis or brain lymphoma.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. A person with HIV who goes on to develop serious illnesses and infections, such as those listed above, is considered to have AIDS. Eventually, these cancers and infections make the person ill and lead to their death.

HIV is present in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. Any practice that allows these fluids to penetrate through the skin or the mucous membranes and into the bloodstream of another person can cause HIV infection. Although the skin normally acts as a barrier to this type of penetration, breaks in the skin through cuts, abrasions, ulcers or sores can occur.

HIV is mainly passed on through unprotected anal or vaginal sex or through blood-to-blood contact. The latter mainly happens when people share injecting equipment, such as amongst injecting drug users. HIV can also sometimes be passed on through oral sex – especially if one person has an untreated sexually transmitted infection. You are at more risk of being infected with HIV from unprotected oral sex if you have cuts, sores or abrasions in the mouth or in the gums, or if you have an infection – including sexually transmitted ones – in the throat or mouth that is causing inflammation.

An HIV positive woman can pass the virus on to her baby, either through the placenta before birth, during birth or through her breast milk.

Symptoms

HIV has no symptoms to begin with, and when they do appear, they are easy to miss as they tend to be cold and flu-like illnesses such as fever, swollen glands or a sore throat. Often, most people with HIV look and feel healthy for a long time (sometimes 10 years or more) and they may not even know they have a virus. **They can still pass it on to others through semen, blood and vaginal fluids.** After a while, other symptoms may develop such as oral thrush or night seats.

As more time passes it is more likely that opportunistic infections will develop. However, it can still take years before a person develops full-blown AIDS. The period between the development of full-blown AIDS and death can be as short as 6 months or as long as 2 years or more. Signs and symptoms which can lead to an AIDS diagnosis can be things like:

- Fever for more than one month.
- Diarrhoea for more than one month.
- Skin infections that are severe or recur.
- Cancers such as Kaposi's sarcoma.
- Genital or anal ulcers for more than one month.
- HIV associated dementia, or brain lymphomas

Usually, one or more of these opportunistic infections is present.

Treatment

There is still no cure for HIV or AIDS, There are treatments available that can dramatically improve and lengthen the lives of people living with the virus. These treatments can have very unpleasant side effects and may not work for everybody.

Prevention

Using a condom or dental dam for oral sex and condoms for anal and vaginal sex can help stop the infection from being passed on. If you are injecting drugs, using clean, sterile needles/syringes lowers your risk of contracting HIV. There is strong evidence which suggests that having an untreated STI increases a person's chance of getting and transmitting HIV. This may happen because STIs can often cause sores or breaks in the skin or mucous membranes. Importantly, if a person has an untreated STI and they are having unprotected sex, they are at an even higher risk of getting HIV.

Getting a regular sexual health screen can also lower your risk of contracting the virus.

CHLAMYDIA

Chlamydia is a very common bacterial infection that affects both men and women. It is passed on through unprotected anal, oral and vaginal sex and it can affect the anus, penis, cervix, throat and eyes.

Untreated chlamydia may make a person with HIV more infectious as chlamydia can cause breaks in the mucous membranes (the barriers) of affected areas, and increases the number of HIV-infected cells in those areas. Having chlamydia can also make it more likely that an HIV negative person will be infected with HIV if they are exposed to the virus.

Chlamydia can also be passed on from mother to child during child birth and can affect the baby's eyes, and cause pneumonia.

Symptoms

Symptoms of chlamydia normally occur one to three weeks after infection. However, it is often the case that most people who have chlamydia are unaware that they have an infection. It is thought that about 50% of men and 70% of women with chlamydia show no symptoms at all. Symptoms can also be very mild and may go unnoticed for weeks. When symptoms do show they can include:

- A milky discharge from the penis or the vagina.
- Painful and swollen testicles.
- Pain during sex.
- Vaginal bleeding during sex.
- Bleeding between periods.
- In women, chlamydia can cause low abdominal pain or back pain.
- If a person has been infected anally, there may be soreness around the anus and discharge.

If chlamydia is left untreated it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women, which can cause ectopic pregnancy, infertility, and even death in some extreme cases. Men are less likely to develop serious complications, though untreated chlamydia may cause infertility. Both men and women may develop arthritis as a result of untreated chlamydia.

Treatment

Chlamydia is easily treated with antibiotics. This normally consists of a seven-day course of doxycycline or a single dose of azithromycin. It is important to take all your tablets to ensure that the infection is completely eradicated from your body. You are likely to be advised not to have sex (even with a condom) until your treatment period is finished – this is to prevent re-infection.

Prevention

Using condoms or dental dams for oral sex and condoms for anal and vaginal sex is an effective way of avoiding getting chlamydia and can also help to stop the infection from being passed on to someone else. If you are sexually active, you should have regular sexual health check-ups, where you will be tested for chlamydia and other sexually transmitted infections.

GONORRHOEA

Gonorrhoea is caused by bacteria that are found mainly in the semen and vaginal fluids of men and women who have the infection. These bacteria can also live in the moist parts of the body like the throat, vagina, anus, penis and the urethra (the tube inside the penis). Gonorrhoea can be passed on during unprotected anal, vaginal, oral and mouth to anus (rimming) sex, and it can affect the anus, penis, cervix and throat.

Like chlamydia, untreated gonorrhoea can make a person with HIV more infectious as gonorrhoea increases the number of HIV-infected cells in the genital area and in the mucous membranes of the mouth and throat. Having gonorrhoea can also make it more likely that an HIV-negative person will be infected if they are exposed to the virus.

Gonorrhoea can also be passed on from mother to baby during childbirth, which can cause an infection in the baby's eyes: this can result in blindness if left untreated.

Symptoms

Symptoms of gonorrhoea can usually appear between two and ten days after infection. However, often, people may not realise they have an infection as symptoms may not always be present, or they may be mild. About one in ten men and one in two women with gonorrhoea have no symptoms at all. Gonorrhoea in the throat rarely shows symptoms. If symptoms appear, they usually include:

- White, yellow or green discharge from the tip of the penis or the vagina that can be strong smelling. Sometimes this discharge can be bloody.
- Pain or burning when passing urine.

- Painful and swollen testicles and/or prostate gland.
- If the infection is in the anus, there could be irritation and a mucousy or bloody discharge from the anus.
- Gonorrhoea in the throat can cause a sore throat.
- In women, gonorrhoea can cause lower abdominal pain or tenderness.

If left untreated, gonorrhoea can cause more serious health problems, such as PID in women, which can cause pain, infertility and ectopic pregnancy (where the pregnancy develops outside of the womb). In men, gonorrhoea can lead to painful infection in the testicles and prostate gland and possibly reduced fertility. Sometimes, gonorrhoea can spread to the bloodstream leading to fevers, and can affect the joints, causing arthritic-like pain and swelling. In extreme cases, the infection can also cause inflammation of the membranes of the brain and spinal cord (meningitis) and the heart.

Treatment

Treatment is simple and effective and involves a single dose of antibiotics. It is very important not to have unprotected anal, oral or vaginal sex for seven days after you have been treated, as you may be re-infected with gonorrhoea or pass the infection on to someone else.

Prevention

Using condoms and dental dams for oral sex, and condoms for anal and vaginal sex is an effective way of avoiding being infected with gonorrhoea or passing the infection on to someone else. A regular sexual health check-up will also screen for gonorrhoea and other sexually transmitted infections.

HERPES

Herpes is caused by two types of the herpes simplex virus. One form of the virus causes blisters around the mouth, whilst the other causes blisters around or on the penis, vagina, and inside the anus. Herpes is usually passed on through contact with these blisters: kissing, unprotected anal, vaginal and oral sex can all pass this infection on. Once you have contracted the herpes virus you will have it for life – the symptoms of herpes do respond to treatment.

Symptoms

As well as the blisters, symptoms of herpes include:

- Flu-like aches and pains in your stomach, lower back, legs and feet.
- Itching or tingling in the affected area may occur before the blisters appear.

Treatment

Your immune system should be able to keep the virus under control, but there are also anti-viral medications which help the treatment of the infection. Special tablets and

creams can help get rid of the blisters, whilst some medications can stop the blisters before they appear

Prevention

Avoid contact with open blisters and using condoms or dental dams for oral sex and condoms for anal and vaginal sex offers protection from infection with herpes or from passing the virus on to someone else.

SYPHILIS

Syphilis is a complex infection caused by bacteria. The disease usually occurs in three stages: primary syphilis, secondary syphilis, and tertiary syphilis. Each stage comes with its own symptoms. During the primary and secondary stages the disease is highly contagious.

Syphilis can be passed on from contact with syphilitic sores during unprotected anal, oral or vaginal sex. It can also be transmitted by close physical contact with syphilitic rashes and lesions, which can appear anywhere on the body, and from contact with blood. Syphilis can also be transmitted from mother to baby.

It is likely that untreated primary and secondary syphilis can make a person with HIV more infectious. Having syphilis may also make it much more likely that an HIV negative person will be infected with HIV if exposed to the virus. Syphilis can also be harder to cure in people with HIV and if it is left untreated it can cause damage to the heart and brain and eventually lead to death.

Symptoms

Primary Syphilis:

- A painless red sore may appear on the vagina, cervix, penis, mouth, testicles or anus. This sore (called a chancre) does not hurt and usually heals quite quickly.
- The glands closest to the sore may also swell up.

Secondary Syphilis (usually develops within 6 months of exposure):

- Skin rash
- Swollen glands
- Fever
- Nausea
- Hair loss
- Dark brown sores on the hands and feet

Tertiary Syphilis (usually develops within ten years of infection):

- Heart damage
- Brain damage (neurosyphilis)

- Nervous system damage

Treatment

Syphilis is usually treated with a course of antibiotics – penicillin injections are often the drug of choice. People with HIV usually receive higher doses of medication for longer. To avoid infecting other people with syphilis or being re-infected with the bacteria, it is important to avoid sex altogether until treatment has been completed and you have been given the all clear. Blood tests should be carried out after treatment to ensure the infection has completely cleared.

Prevention

Using a condom or dental dam for oral sex and a condom for anal or vaginal sex offers protection from infection with syphilis and can help stop the infection from being passed on. You should also avoid contact with any open sores. Protection is not complete because lesions and rashes may not necessarily be in the genital area. People who are sexually active should have a regular sexual health screen, which will test for syphilis and other sexually transmitted infections.

GENITAL WARTS

Genital warts are caused by an extremely common virus that lives under the skin. This virus is known as the human papilloma virus (HPV). Some strains of the genital wart virus can lead to cervical or anal cancer. This risk is higher in people who have HIV because there is more chance that the virus will become reactivated due to a loss of immunity. Once you have picked up genital warts, you will have the virus for the rest of your life, but this does not mean that you will keep getting warts.

Genital warts can be passed on through unprotected anal, oral and vaginal sex. It can also be passed on through close physical bodily contact with the genital warts themselves, as these can shed the wart virus.

Symptoms

Symptoms of genital warts usually appear a few weeks after infection. The warts look just like warts which may appear on other parts of the body – like small, fleshy growths with a slightly rough texture. These warts will get bigger unless they are treated and they may also become cauliflower shaped. Sometimes the warts may itch and warts in the rectum might bleed. However, some people who contract the wart virus do not have any symptoms, or they might not notice the appearance of the warts. In women, warts may appear on the inside or the outside of the vagina. They can also appear on the neck of the cervix, and around the anus. In men, warts can appear on the tip or shaft of the penis, or around the anus.

Treatment

Although the infection with the genital wart virus cannot be cured, the warts themselves can be treated. Genital warts can be painted with a chemical that burns them, or they can be frozen off. Other treatments include laser surgery or a new

immune stimulating cream. These treatments can take a long time to work, so you may need to be treated several times before the warts disappear. The treatments may also feel a little uncomfortable. To avoid re-infection, any sexual partners should also be treated. Importantly, condoms should be used as soon as warts are noticed and throughout the treatment stage. It is also advisable to continue using condoms for three months after the warts have cleared.

Prevention

Avoiding contact with the warts as soon as they appear and using a condom or dental dam for oral sex and condoms for anal and vaginal sex will offer a degree of protection from infection with genital warts, or from passing on the virus to someone else. People who are sexually active should go for regular sexual health check-ups, where genital warts can be diagnosed if present, and they can also be tested for other sexually transmitted infections.

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