

STD

What are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

Sexually transmitted diseases are diseases that can be passed from person to person through sexual contact. Depending on the STD, sexual contact that causes transmission can include penis-vagina penetration, oral sex, anal sex. Occasionally, STDs can be transmitted in non-sexual ways, such as through casual contact, by sharing needles, or from an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy or delivery.

There are many different kinds of STDs: some are easily cured with simple drugs, some take multiple kinds of treatments and drugs to cure, and some can only be treated and not cured. It is important to understand STDs to be able to protect yourself from future infection, to be able to recognize the symptoms of STDs, and to be able to seek treatment if you think you might have an STD.

Are sexually transmitted infections (STIs) different from sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

Sometimes the terms STI and STD are used interchangeably. This can be confusing and not always accurate, so it helps first to understand the difference between infection and disease. Infection simply means that a germ – virus, bacteria, or parasite – that can cause disease or sickness is present inside a person's body. An infected person does not necessarily have any symptoms or signs that the virus or bacteria is actually hurting their body (they do not necessarily feel sick). A disease means that the infection is actually causing the infected person to feel sick, or to notice something is wrong. For this reason, the term STI – which refers to infection with any germ that can cause an STD, even if the infected person has no symptoms – is a much broader term than STD.

The term STD refers only to infections that are causing symptoms or problems. Because most of the time, people don't know they are infected with an STI until they start showing symptoms of disease, even though the term STI is also appropriate in many cases.

Depending on the STI, a person may or may not still be able to spread the infection if no signs of disease are present. For example, a person is much more likely to spread herpes infection when blisters are present (STD) than when they are absent (STI). However, a person can spread HIV infection (STI) at any time, even if they haven't developed symptoms of AIDS (STD).

What are symptoms of STDs?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are diseases caused by germs that are passed from one person to another during sex.

You may have an STD if you have one or more of the following symptoms:

- pus or smelly fluids coming out of the penis or vagina
- blisters, sores or warts on the penis or vagina
- pain or burning when urinating
- pain during sex

- pain in the lower abdomen
- unusual swelling near the penis or vagina
- itching on or near your genitals

If you think you have an STD, you should go to a doctor, clinic or hospital for treatment. STDs can be cured with pills. Sometimes an injection is given. If you have an STD, your healthworker will advise you to:

- finish the course of treatment that you are given
- advise your sexual partner(s) to go for treatment
- use condoms every time you have sex

Untreated STDs can result in serious illness and infertility. They also lead to easier infection with HIV. STDs cause sores and also weaken the skin of the penis or vagina, making it easier for HIV to enter the body. STD infection can also be passed on to an unborn or newborn baby by an infected mother.

Why is knowing whether I have an STD important if I am pregnant or planning to become pregnant?

Many STDs can be passed from a mother to her baby either while she is pregnant (syphilis) or while the baby is passing through the birth canal during delivery (chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, and others). The consequences of STD infection in infants can be extremely serious and lifelong, including blindness, deformity, brain damage, deafness, pneumonia, and even fetal or infant death.

With medicines and appropriate medical care, it is easy to prevent the transmission of STDs from the mother to her child. This is why it is important for women planning to have children, or who are already pregnant, to seek testing and treatment for STDs if they could have been exposed

Which STDs are transmitted through oral sex?

You can only become infected with or pass on an STD if you or your partner is infected with an STD in the first place. The following sexually transmitted diseases or infections can be passed on through unprotected oral sex:

- Hepatitis A, B and C
- Herpes, especially if the sores are in the infectious stage
- HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is fairly low risk in terms of transmission via oral sex
- Gonorrhoea
- Syphilis
- NSU (Non-specific urethritis)
- Chlamydia
- Yeast infections such as thrush are fairly low risk in terms transmission via oral sex
- Genital Warts

If you are concerned about becoming infected with an STD as a result of oral sex use a condom when giving oral sex on a man or a dental dam (latex square) when giving oral sex to a woman.

How do you know that you have an STD?

Anyone who is sexually active can be at risk from STDs. Some STDs can have symptoms, such as genital discharge, pain when urinating and genital swelling and inflammation. Many STDs, such as Chlamydia, can frequently be symptomless. This is why it is advisable to have a sexual health check-up, to screen for STDs, if you think you have been at risk. It can sometimes take a long time for STDs to display any symptoms, and you can pass on any infections during this time, further demonstrating the need to be tested and treated. If you are in a relationship, and are diagnosed with an STD, it does not necessarily mean that your partner has been unfaithful. Symptoms of STDs can present themselves months after infection.

Does a white patch on the penis or genitals indicate a STD?

Leucoderma (a white patch) is a skin disorder. It is not a STD. Sometimes there can be a hypopigmented patch (light coloured skin) due to a healed STD as a sequelae of genital ulcer. The skin in the pubic area and on the inner side of thigh (intercrural) can be of darker colour. This may be due to Tinea cruris (a fungal infection). Generally, a change in skin colour is not due to current STDs. However, in case of doubts, such persons should consult a physician.

What are the symptoms and signs of genital herpes?

Genital herpes is caused by a virus named herpes simplex virus (HSV). Initially the patients develop vesicles (fluid-filled skin lesions) in grape like clusters and later these vesicles break to form ulcers or sores. These clinical manifestations generally occur within a few days of "at risk" exposure. Generally these ulcers last for about 5-15 days. The ulcers tend to be recurrent appear again without reinfection or "risk" exposure). The ulcers in the first episode of genital herpes are painful. However, the duration and intensity of pain reduces with increasing relapses. Often the pain is more severe in females. The patient may develop painful lymph gland in the groin. Symptoms such as tingling sensation and numbness are common symptoms, which warns an individual of an impending recurrence of genital herpes with 48 hours. Most often the first episode of herpes is likely to be asymptomatic. Genital herpes can be suppressed by using certain medicines which prevent its replication. However, once infected at least a few recurrences (about-7-8) may be expected in the next couple of years.

What is a "white discharge"?

When a woman starts discharging white cream coloured secretions from the vagina, it is called "white discharge" in common language and "leucorrhoea" in medical terms. Normally women get a thin discharge from the vagina just around the scheduled days of menses. This is considered normal unless it is associated with a foul smell. Some of these diseases are categorized as sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea, chlamydia infection etc. However, one must remember that not every person who has white discharge is suffering from a sexually transmitted disease. Poor genital hygiene and underlying systemic diseases like diabetes make a patient vulnerable to certain infections leading to leucorrhoea, even in the absence of risky sexual exposure. Leucorrhoea can be easily treated by medicines prescribed by the doctors. In such conditions the secretion may be thick, copious yellowish, greenish and may be foul smelling. It is always better to consult a doctor for white discharge rather than indulging in self-medication.

What are genital warts?

Genital warts is a sexually transmitted disease. It causes small, painless cauliflower like growths on the genitals. Unless treated, the growth keeps on increasing.

Does homosexuality lead to STD?

If one of the partners is infected with STDs, the risk of acquiring STD increases even amongst homosexuals. The risk of acquiring certain infections is higher if it is a peno-anal intercourse and one of the partners has a STD.

Can STDs lead to HIV/AIDS infection?

STDs, per se, do not get converted into AIDS. People suffering from STD however are predisposed to HIV infection, especially those having ulcers on genitals. STDs facilitate entry of HIV in the body. The risk of acquiring HIV infection through sexual intercourse with a person having STDs are increased by 2 to 10 times. HIV infected persons having STDs spread HIV quickly as they will shed HIV in their genital secretions. Hence timely, proper and adequate treatment of STDs is critical in HIV/AIDS control.

How should one avoid development of complications of STDs?

Following measures are important in avoiding complications of STDs:

- i) Early diagnosis of STDs. Any person who suffers from the symptoms mentioned above and has a history of risky unprotected sexual intercourse should consult a physician at the earliest.
- ii) Proper and complete treatment of STDs. The patients of STDs must remember that they should consult a qualified physician and not a quack for its management. The treatment must be taken completely. There is a tendency to change the physician too often and too quickly amongst STD patients. This should be avoided.
- iii) Treatment of the sexual partners of STD patients. Most often STD patients do not bring their regular partner for clinical evaluation and management. During the episode of STDs, if they had sexual intercourse with their regular partner (most often wife), the STD is likely to be transmitted to the partner, unknowingly. The STD patient may seek treatment and get cured himself/herself. However, if treatment is not given to the regular partner who may be already infected, not only does the partner develop STD but may pass it during their subsequent sex acts to the index case again. This patient then might feel that the treatment given by the physician was not "powerful" as it has recurred and may change the physician. Hence partner management is crucial in STD control.
- iv) Regular follow up and check up. These might be required to ensure that the medicines given to the patient are working and have cured him of the STD. Even HIV tests can be done after completing the window period..
- v) Keeping away from quacks. This can create a state of complacency and can lead to delays in seeking appropriate treatment. Hence it should be avoided

Is there a connection between HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases?

Ans. Yes. Having a sexually transmitted disease (STD) can increase a person's risk of becoming infected with HIV, whether the STD causes open sores or breaks in the skin (e.g., syphilis, herpes, chancroid) or does not cause breaks in the skin (e.g., chlamydia, gonorrhoea).

If the STD infection causes irritation of the skin, breaks or sores may make it easier for HIV to enter the body during sexual contact. Even when the STD causes no breaks or open sores, the infection can stimulate an immune response in the genital area that can make HIV transmission more likely.

In addition, if an HIV-infected person also is infected with another STD, that person is three to five times more likely than other HIV-infected persons to transmit HIV through sexual contact.

Not having (abstaining from) sexual intercourse is the most effective way to avoid STDs, including HIV. For those who choose to be sexually active, the following HIV prevention activities are highly effective:

- Engaging in sex that does not involve vaginal, anal, or oral sex
- Having intercourse with only one uninfected partner
- Using latex condoms every time you have sex

- **How can I avoid getting an STD?**

The best way to avoid getting an STD is by abstaining from (not having) sex. This includes oral, vaginal, and anal sex. Some STDs, like herpes and HPV, cannot always be prevented with condoms, so not having sex protects you from this risk.

If you are a teenager, delaying having sex until your twenties can reduce your risk of getting an STD. The younger you are when you start having sex, the more likely you are to get an STD. Also, the more sexual partners you have in a lifetime, the greater your risk.

If you are sexually active, take precautions with your sexual partner(s). This means talking honestly about your sexual experiences in the past and your faithfulness in the present, and going to a clinic (separately or together) to make sure neither of you have an STD, even if you have no symptoms. Staying faithful to one another once you know you are both uninfected is the second best way to avoid getting an STD.

If abstinence or being faithful to one uninfected partner is not possible for you, consider using a condom **every time** you have sex. While condoms are not 100% effective in preventing the transmission of STDs, they help reduce your risk of getting almost all STDs. Especially when having sex with a new partner, have regular check-ups to screen for STDs. Additional ways to reduce your risk include avoiding sex during a woman's menstrual period, avoiding douching (for women), avoiding anal sex without a condom, and learning to recognize symptoms early.