

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are passed from one person to another through unprotected sex or genital contact.

You can be tested for STIs at a sexual health clinic, genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic or DOCTOR surgery.

This page provides an overview of the different STIs and links to more information about these conditions.

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is one of the most common STIs and is easily passed on during sex. Most people don't experience any symptoms so are unaware they are infected.

In women, chlamydia can cause pain or a burning sensation when urinating, a vaginal discharge, pain in the lower abdomen during or after sex, and bleeding during or after sex, or between periods. It can also cause heavy periods.

In men, chlamydia can cause pain or a burning sensation when urinating, a white, cloudy or watery discharge from the tip of the penis, and pain or tenderness in the testicles.

It's also possible to have a chlamydia infection in your rectum (bottom), throat or eyes.

Diagnosing chlamydia is easily done with a urine test or by taking a swab of the affected area. The infection is easily treated with antibiotics, but can lead to serious long-term health problems if left untreated, including infertility.

Genital warts

Genital warts are small fleshy growths, bumps or skin changes that appear on or around your genital or anal area. They're caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV).

The warts are usually painless, but you may notice some itching or redness. Occasionally, they can cause bleeding.

You don't need to have penetrative sex to pass the infection on because HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact.

Several treatments are available for genital warts, including creams and cryotherapy (freezing the warts).

Genital herpes

Genital herpes is a common infection caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV), which is the same virus that causes cold sores.

Some people develop symptoms of HSV a few days after coming into contact with the virus. Small, painful blisters or sores usually develop, which may cause itching or tingling or make it painful to urinate.

After you've been infected, the virus remains dormant (inactive) for most of the time. However, certain triggers can re-activate the virus, causing the blisters to develop again, although they're usually smaller and less painful.

It's easier to test for HSV if you have symptoms. Although there's no cure for genital herpes, the symptoms can usually be controlled using antiviral medicines.

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is a bacterial STI easily passed on during sex.

About 50% of women and 10% of men don't experience any symptoms and are unaware they're infected.

In women, gonorrhoea can cause pain or a burning sensation when urinating, a vaginal discharge (often watery, yellow or green), pain in the lower abdomen during or after sex, and bleeding during or after sex or between periods, sometimes causing heavy periods.

In men, gonorrhoea can cause pain or a burning sensation when urinating, a white, yellow or green discharge from the tip of the penis, and pain or tenderness in the testicles.

It's also possible to have a gonorrhoea infection in your rectum, throat or eyes.

Gonorrhoea can be easily diagnosed using a urine test, or by taking a swab of the affected area. The infection is easily treated with antibiotics, but can lead to serious long-term health problems if left untreated, including infertility.

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that in the early stages causes a painless but highly infectious sore on your genitals or around the mouth. The sore can last for up to six weeks before disappearing.

Secondary symptoms such as a rash, flu-like illness or patchy hair loss may then develop. These may disappear within a few weeks, after which you will have a symptom-free phase.

The late or tertiary stage of syphilis usually occurs after many years and can cause serious conditions, such as heart problems, paralysis and blindness.

The symptoms of syphilis can be difficult to recognise. A simple blood test can usually be used to diagnose syphilis at any stage. It can be treated with antibiotics, usually penicillin injections. When syphilis is treated properly, the later stages can be prevented.

HIV

HIV is most commonly passed on through unprotected sex. It can also be transmitted by coming into contact with infected blood - for example, sharing needles to inject steroids or drugs.

The HIV virus attacks and weakens the immune system, making it less able to fight infections and disease. There's no cure for HIV but there are treatments that allow most people to live a long and otherwise healthy life.

AIDS is the final stage of an HIV infection, when your body can no longer fight life-threatening infections.

Most people with HIV will look and feel healthy and have no symptoms. When you first develop HIV you may experience a flu-like illness with a fever, sore throat or rash. This is called a seroconversion illness.

A simple blood test is usually used to test for an HIV infection. Some clinics may also offer a rapid test using a finger prick blood test or saliva sample.

Trichomonas vaginalis

Trichomonas vaginalis (TV) is an STI caused by a tiny parasite. It can be easily passed on through sex and most people are unaware they are infected.

In women, TV can cause a frothy yellow or watery vaginal discharge which has an unpleasant smell, soreness or itching around the vagina, and pain when passing urine.

In men, TV rarely causes symptoms. You may experience pain or burning after passing urine, a whitish discharge, or an inflamed foreskin.

TV can sometimes be difficult to diagnose and your DOCTOR may suggest you go to a specialist clinic for a urine or swab test. Once diagnosed, TV can usually be treated with antibiotics.

Pubic lice

Pubic lice ('crabs') are easily passed to others through close genital contact. They're usually found in pubic hair but can live in underarm hair, body hair, beards and occasionally eyebrows or eyelashes.

The lice crawl from hair to hair but don't jump or fly from person to person. It may take several weeks for you to notice any symptoms. Most people will experience itching, and you may notice the lice or eggs on the hairs.

Pubic lice can usually be successfully treated with special creams or shampoos available over the counter in most pharmacies or from a DOCTOR or GUM clinic. You don't need to shave off your pubic hair or body hair.

Scabies

Scabies is caused by tiny mites that burrow into the skin. It can be passed on through close body or sexual contact, or from infected clothing, bedding or towels.

If you develop scabies you may have intense itching that is worse at night. The itching can be in your genital area, but it also often occurs between your fingers, on wrists and ankles, under your arms, or on your body and breasts.

You may have a rash or tiny spots. In some people, scabies can be confused with eczema. It's usually very difficult to see the mites.

Scabies can usually be successfully treated using special creams or shampoos available over the counter in most pharmacies or from a DOCTOR or GUM clinic. The itching can sometimes continue for a short period even after effective treatment.

Visiting an STI clinic

Getting tested and treated for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is straightforward and confidential. Most infections can be cured.

A sexual health or genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic specialises in sexual health and gives tests and treatment for many STIs.

Answering some questions

You will see a doctor or a nurse and they'll ask you about your medical and sexual history. Be prepared to answer questions about your sex life, including:

when you last had sex

whether you have had unprotected sex

whether you have any symptoms

why you think you might have an infection

You can ask to see a female doctor or nurse if you prefer, but you might have to wait longer than usual for one to become available.

Having STI tests

The doctor or nurse will tell you what tests they think you need. They should explain to you what is going on and why they are suggesting these tests. If you're not sure about anything, ask them to explain.

The tests might involve:

a urine (pee) sample

a blood sample

swabs from the vagina, which you can usually do yourself

an examination of your genitals

Testing for chlamydia and gonorrhoea usually requires only a urine sample.

Testing for HIV and syphilis needs a blood sample.

Tests for herpes aren't usually done unless you have sores on your genitals or anus. In this case, a swab will be taken from a sore. This will be uncomfortable for a moment.

Find out more about:

chlamydia test

herpes test

syphilis test

gonorrhoea test

HIV test

Getting your test results

With some tests, you can get the results (and treatment, if you need it) on the same day. For others, you might have to wait for a week or two. If this is the case, the clinic will check how you would prefer to receive your results.

If you test positive for an STI, you will be asked to go back to the clinic to talk about your results and your treatment. Many STIs can be cured with antibiotics. Some infections, such as HIV, have no cure, but there are treatments available. The clinic can advise you on these and can put you in touch with a counsellor.

If possible, tell your sexual partner and any ex-partners so that they can get tested and treated as well. If you don't want to do this, the clinic can usually do it for you (it's called partner notification and the clinic won't reveal who you are).

Using condoms to protect against STIs

The best way to protect yourself from getting or passing on an infection is to use a condom every time you have sex. The clinic can give you some condoms so you can practice safer sex.

Always buy condoms that have the CE mark on the packet. This means that they've been tested to high European safety standards. Condoms that don't have the CE mark won't meet these standards, so don't use them. Get tips on using condoms properly.

Bear in mind that having an STI in the past doesn't make you immune to it – you can get the same infection again.