

Sexually transmissible infections - overview

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) are common all around the world. They may be caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites. You may think that only other people get STIs and that you are not at risk of catching one, but anybody who is sexually active can be infected if they do not practice safe sex. You can't tell just by looking at a person that they have an STI. If you have unprotected sex with a person infected with an STI, you are at high risk of catching that infection.

Sexually transmissible infections include chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhoea, syphilis, genital herpes, scabies, pubic lice (crabs), hepatitis and HIV (the virus that causes AIDS).

It is recommended that you talk to your doctor about having a check-up, even if you do not have any signs or symptoms of an STI.

The symptoms can vary

There are many different STIs and there are many signs that mean you may have caught one. Sometimes there are no signs at all. Common symptoms can include:

- Unusual discharge from the penis or vagina
- Pain during sex or urination
- Sores, blisters, ulcers, warts or rashes in the genital area
- Itchiness or irritation in the genital area
- Persistent diarrhoea.
- Fever, flu-like symptoms.

STIs are passed on during sex

The most common sexual activities that can spread an STI from one partner to another include:

- **Vaginal sex** – the man's penis in the woman's vagina.
- **Anal sex** – the man's penis in the partner's anus (the partner can be either male or female).
- **Oral sex** – the man's penis in the partner's mouth, or the partner's mouth or tongue in the woman's vagina.
- **Oral-anal sex** – one partner's mouth or tongue on the other partner's anus.

Condoms and dams help prevent infection

It is not difficult to avoid catching STIs. You can prevent most STIs by using barrier protection such as condoms, female condoms and dams (a thin piece of latex placed over the anal or vulval area during oral sex).

Most people are familiar with condoms for men. The female condom is a 14cm, prelubricated sheath that fits loosely into the vagina and can be put in up to eight hours before sex. Female condoms should not be used together with male condoms because the friction between the two may cause the condoms to break. Dams are rectangular sheets of latex, which can be used to cover the vagina or anus to prevent the exchange of bodily fluids during oral sex. They are sometimes called dental dams because they are also used during dental surgery.

Condoms for men can be bought from supermarkets, pharmacists and other outlets. Female condoms and dams are available through Family Planning Victoria and may be available from selected shops. Latex free condoms are also available from some outlets. Male condoms and lubricant are available free from the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre, along with female condoms and dams on request. Female condoms are more expensive and not as widely available as condoms for men, but some couples prefer to use them.

General tips for correct use of condoms and dams

Condoms and dams are effective in helping prevent the spread of most STIs if they are used every time you have sex. Some tips for correct use include:

- Use well-known brands and check the expiry date.
- Store in a cool, dry place away from direct sunlight.
- Make sure the condom or dam is free of holes or breakage before use.
- Use water based lubricants like KY. Don't use Vaseline, baby oil or massage oils, which can weaken and split condoms or dams.
- Use each condom or dam once only.
- Use dams for oral sex only – do not use as protection for anal or vaginal sex.

Type of help available

Many STIs are easily treated once they are diagnosed. Treatments for the different types of infections can include:

- Bacteria – antibiotics, either one high dose or a course
- Parasites – medicated shampoos
- Viruses – there are no cures for viral STIs. In most cases, there are treatments to help control the symptoms.

STI check-ups

If you have unprotected sex with a person who has an STI, you are at high risk of catching that infection. It is recommended that you talk to your doctor about having a check-up if you have had unsafe sex, even if you do not have any signs or symptoms of an STI.

Where to get help

You can contact the following services for help and further advice.

- Your doctor
- Your school nurse or school welfare coordinator
- Youth worker, welfare worker or social worker
- Your local community health centre
- The Action Centre (for young people less than 25 years) Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9654 4766
- Family Planning Victoria Tel. 1800 013 952 or (03) 9257 0100
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre Tel. (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY (for the hearing impaired) (03) 9347 8619
- Victoria AIDS Council/Gay Men's Health Centre Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840
- The Education & Resource Centre at The Alfred Tel. (03) 9276 6993
- The Centre Clinic, Northcote Tel. (03) 9481 7155
- The Centre Clinic, St Kilda Tel. (03) 9525 5866
- Sexual Health Clinic Ballarat Tel. (03) 5338 4540
- Bendigo Community Health Tel. (03) 5434 4330
- Geelong Sexual Health Clinic Tel. (03) 5221 4735
- STD Clinic Wodonga Tel. (03) 6051 7535
- STD/AIDS Clinic Traralgon Tel. (03) 5173 8111
- HIV – Sexual Health Connect Tel. 1800 038 125

Things to remember

- Anyone who is sexually active can catch an STI.
- Correct use of condoms and dams can help reduce the risk of catching an STI.
- Medical treatment can cure some STIs or help relieve symptoms for others.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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