

# The In's & Out's of STIs

## What is an STI?

A sexually transmissible infection (STI) is an infection that can be passed on through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Most STIs are transmitted through an exchange of body fluids, but some can be passed on through skin to skin genital contact.

STIs can cause a wide range of health problems, from mild irritation to serious illness. Many STIs are easily treated with antibiotics, but can have long-term consequences if left untreated.

Many people with an STI have no symptoms, but some people do. Signs of an STI can include:

- unusual discharge from the penis or vagina
- itchiness around the genital area
- a burning sensation when peeing
- a rash, sores or small lumps on or around the penis, vagina or anus
- unusual bleeding from the vagina

If you notice any of these symptoms, or if you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA. Testing for STIs is quick and painless - it only takes a few minutes and usually involves a urine sample.

It's important to let any sexual partners know if you notice any unusual symptoms such as a rash or discharge. Sometimes symptoms go away by themselves, but this doesn't mean the infection has gone.

***Fact - many STIs have no symptoms, so it's possible to have one and not know it. Most STIs can be easily treated.***

## Protect yourself

Condoms and dams help reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex). They stop bodily fluids like semen, blood and vaginal fluids from being exchanged. As some STIs can be passed on through skin to skin contact, it's important to remember that condoms and dams only protect the area of skin they cover.

Use water-based lubricants with condoms, as oil-based lubricants like Vaseline and massage oil weaken condoms and increase the risk of breakage. Use a new condom or dam every time you have sex and check the expiry date before use.

If you think there is a chance you might have sex, be prepared and have some condoms handy. Many people think they are in an exclusive relationship, but this isn't always the case. As things can change in a relationship without you knowing, the best way to protect yourself is to use a condom or dam every time you have sex.

***Fact - condoms are the only form of protection that reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI and help prevent pregnancy.***

Emergency contraception (EC) is available if you've had unprotected intercourse or if the condom breaks or comes off. It needs to be taken as soon as possible afterwards though there is some effectiveness for up to five days. EC is available over the counter at pharmacies, so you don't need to see a doctor to get a prescription.

## Decisions about sex

Making decisions about sex can be difficult. Deciding what's right for you is up to you. This includes deciding when and who to have sex with, and how to go about doing it safely, or maybe deciding not to have sex at all.

It's important to take your time when it comes to making decisions about relationships and sex so you don't make a decision you might regret later on.

If you do decide to have sex, try and talk about safe sex early on, before the heat of the moment. Even though this may be difficult, sex will be a lot more enjoyable if you aren't worrying about STIs or pregnancy.

***Fact - girls who start having sex at an early age are more likely to develop cervical cancer.***

## Drugs and alcohol

Alcohol and other drugs affect people's ability to make safe decisions. If you take drugs or drink alcohol know your own limits so you can make the same safe decisions that you would if you were sober. Sharing equipment such as needles, spoons and tourniquets can put you at risk of HIV and hepatitis C.

***Fact - being forced to have sex against your will is a crime. No one has the right to force you to have sex if you don't want to.***

## Common STIs

### Chlamydia

Chlamydia is one of the most common STIs among young people in Australia. Many people with chlamydia have no symptoms at all. Symptoms can include a burning sensation when peeing or an unusual discharge from the penis or vagina.

### Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea often has no symptoms, though people with an infection may have unusual discharge from the penis or vagina or pain when peeing.

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea can also be caught in the throat. Many people with chlamydia and gonorrhoea don't know they have them because of the lack of symptoms. Both can be cured with antibiotics. If left untreated they can lead to infertility in men and women (when you can't have children).

### Genital Herpes

Herpes can infect the mouth or genital area. While many people with genital herpes experience no symptoms, the first sign of an infection is often an itching or tingling sensation in the genital area, followed by tiny blisters appearing. People with an infection may also have flu-like symptoms like fever, headaches and muscle aches and pains.

## Genital Warts

Warts are small cauliflower-shaped or flat lumps that lie on the skin. Genital warts can be found on the vagina, vulva (vaginal lips), cervix (opening to the womb) or anus in women or on the penis, anus or testicles in men. They can be passed on through vaginal, anal or oral contact. Sometimes genital warts are so small that they can't be seen or felt, so it is possible to have warts and not know it. Genital warts are sometimes detected when a girl has a Pap smear.

## Other STIs

### Hepatitis B

Hepatitis affects the liver. Many people infected with the virus show no symptoms of infection, although others may experience yellowing of the skin and eyes, fever, loss of appetite, tiredness and pains in the joints soon after infection.

### HIV/AIDS

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus which attacks the body's immune system and can lead to the later stage of infection known as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Early HIV symptoms include a flu-like illness, similar to glandular fever, with swollen glands in the neck, armpits and groin, and headaches, fever and a rash.

Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal fluids and can be passed on through unprotected sexual activity, sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, and the use of non-sterile tattooing and body piercing equipment.

### Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is passed on through blood-to-blood contact. Some people infected with hepatitis C experience no symptoms at first, while others develop a flu-like illness. Sometimes urine also becomes dark and the skin and eyes turn yellow. The most common way people become infected in Australia is by sharing drug injecting equipment. Hepatitis C can also be passed on through unsterilised tattoo and body piercing equipment and sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes. It is not often sexually transmitted but there is still a risk involved, particularly if a woman has her period or if the skin is broken.

### Syphilis

The first sign of syphilis is a painless sore that usually appears on or near the genital area or mouth soon after infection. This generally heals within 2-3 weeks but if left untreated, the infection moves into its secondary stage. Symptoms at this time can include a rash (especially on the hands and feet), swollen glands and hair loss.

## What do I do now?

If you think you have an STI or if you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA. Don't wait and hope the symptoms will disappear – even if signs of an STI go away, the infection can remain in your body and cause health problems later on.

Many people feel embarrassed if they get an STI, but don't let this stop you from seeking treatment. Doctors treat STIs all the time and any information about you is kept completely confidential. It's not the end of the world if you have an STI as most can be easily treated.

Take responsibility and look after your own sexual health – don't rely on someone else to do it for you. Be confident about the decisions you make and enjoy yourself.

### **Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).**

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For further information on sexual health visit the family planning website:  
<http://www.fpwa-health.org.au>

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