

STI & HIV/AIDS Overview

Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs)

We talk about sex much more today than we ever have before. We accept our sexuality and display it in the way we dress, talk and behave. So why is it that we don't talk about the health issues involved with sex? Why are the illnesses associated with sex still taboo?

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) are common infections that don't just go away if we don't do anything about them.

The key to prevention is communication. Talking about STIs freely helps to breakdown the taboos that have developed. No one should ever feel embarrassed talking about safe sex or STIs. In fact by using your imagination a discussion about safe sex can be fantastic foreplay.

A dose of communication, combined with love and respect, is the perfect recipe for great safe sex! Having an STI can mean anything from a minor inconvenience to a life threatening disease. Some are easily treated and others have no cure. The best way to deal with sexual illness is prevention, early detection and early treatment.

Safe sex is about taking responsibility for your own health and being in control of your own body.

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes is a very common viral infection. In fact, 1 in 5 people carry the virus.

It is transmitted through skin to skin contact mainly when small blister-like sores appear. However the virus can be spread when sores are not present.

Often people do not know they have herpes, because they do not recognise mild symptoms. As herpes is a virus there is not yet a cure. However proper diagnosis is important as various treatments can reduce the severity and frequency of an outbreak and may reduce the risk of transmission. Condoms can give protection by preventing skin to skin contact.

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most common of the notifiable STIs particularly amongst 20 - 25 year olds. If you test positive recent sexual partners must be notified and encouraged to go for a test.

Chlamydia is considered the 'silent disease' as there are often no obvious signs or symptoms. However it may cause pain when urinating and there is often a discharge from the vagina/penis. It is a bacterial infection and can be cured with antibiotics.

Testing involves a simple urine test and/or cervical swab for women. If left untreated chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can result in infertility.

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is a bacteria spread through vaginal, oral or anal sex. It is also known as "The Clap", "The Drip" and "A Dose". This is because the most obvious symptom is a pus-like discharge from the penis/vagina, through up to 80% of women and some men have no symptoms whatsoever.

Gonorrhoea is easily treated with antibiotics, however if left untreated may lead to infertility in men and women and swollen testicles in men.

Genital Warts

Genital Warts are the most common STI. They are caused by strains of Human Papilloma Virus – HPV. It is estimated that 2 in 3 people aged between 19 and 25 will at some time have HPV.

This group of viruses is spread through skin to skin contact during vaginal, anal and oral sex. HPV infection is often invisible, so it is possible to be infected and not know you have it. Having genital warts is not the end of the world, they can be treated but you may still carry the virus. If you're female and have HPV you must have Pap smears regularly. HPV can increase the risk of cervical cancer.

HIV/AIDS

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is an illness which affects the body's immune system, so that it is unable to fight infections. It is the virus that causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV lives in blood, semen and vaginal fluids and is transmitted through unprotected anal or vaginal sex.

It is thought that there may be a slight risk of transmission during oral sex with an infected person so it is best to use a condom or dam for oral sex too. Sharing needles and syringes will also put you at risk. It can sometimes be transmitted from mother to baby through contact with infected blood or blood products and via breast milk.

In the first few months after infection some people may experience flu-like symptoms. However many experience no symptoms for years.

Currently there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, but early diagnosis is important as there are a number of treatments available to manage the illness.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B can be found in blood, semen, vaginal fluid and body secretions and is transmitted by vaginal, anal and oral sex or by sharing needles and syringes.

Many people infected with the virus show no symptoms of infection while some people may experience jaundice, dark urine, lethargy and abdominal pains.

After initial infection 5 - 10% of people will remain infectious. Of these some will go on to develop cirrhosis of the liver and/or liver cancer, as the long term effects of Hepatitis B. There is no cure though experimental treatments are being developed.

Australian medical authorities recommend that everybody be vaccinated against Hepatitis B.

Contact your doctor for more information.

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

ALL INFORMATION HAS BEEN SUPPLIED AND WRITTEN BY THE FAMILY PLANNING ASSOCIATION OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA.

Copyright 2004 Family Planning Association of Western Australia Inc

Disclaimer: The information contained in this STI fact sheet is produced by FPWA for the purpose of disseminating health information free of charge for the benefit of the public. It is not a substitute for independent professional advice. Nothing contained in this STI fact sheet is intended to be used as medical advice and it is not intended to be used to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent any disease, nor should it be used for therapeutic purposes or as a substitute for your own health professional's advice. FPWA does not accept any liability for any injury, loss or damage incurred by use of or reliance on the information and recommends that the recipient contact FPWA or their medical practitioner directly for further, more specific, information.



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

Contact Details:
Address: 70, Roe St., PO Box 141, Northbridge, WA, 6865, Australia.
Ph (08) 9227 6177
Fax (08) 9227 6871