

Sexually Transmissible Infections

What is a sexually transmissible infection (STI)?

An STI is an infection that can be passed on through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Bacterial STIs are caused by bacteria and viral STIs are caused by viruses. Most STIs are transmitted through an exchange of body fluids, but some can be passed on through genital skin to skin contact.

How do I know if I have an STI?

Most people with an STI have no symptoms, so it's possible to have one, not know it and pass it onto others through unprotected sexual activity. The only way to know for sure is to get tested. This is especially important if you notice any unusual symptoms, or if you've had unprotected sex.

While many people have no symptoms, others may notice:

- unusual discharge from the penis, vagina or anus
- 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 eg after sex or between periods
- pain and swelling in the testicles

Sometimes symptoms go away by themselves, but this doesn't mean the infection has gone.

Did you know...?

- Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STI among young people in Australia
- You can get the same bacterial STI more than once
- You can have more than one STI at a time
- STIs can cause a range of health problems, from mild irritation to serious illness
- Being on the Pill doesn't protect you against STIs
- You can get an STI from unprotected oral sex
- You can have an STI and not know it
- Condoms are the only form of protection that reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI as well as helping prevent pregnancy

Testing and treatment

Getting tested for STIs is simple - it only takes a few minutes and often involves a urine sample and/or genital swab and blood test. You can get tested by a doctor or at FFWA Sexual Health Services. Testing is usually free, though you may need to pay for your appointment.

If you are female, you can get tested for some STIs at the same time as your Pap smear – talk to your health professional for more information. You can also ask to take your own swab if you want.

In most cases you can get the results of an STI test confidentially over the phone. Test results usually take about a week to come back, but someone with symptoms of an STI can be given

treatment without waiting for results. If results show you have an infection, sexual partners also need to be tested and treated, otherwise re-infection can occur. Your health professional can contact your partner/s for you if you want to protect your identity.

As a result of being caused by different microorganisms, bacterial and viral STIs vary in their treatment. Bacterial STIs are often easily cured with antibiotics if detected early, but can have long-term consequences if left untreated. Viral STIs have no cure, but treatments are available to ease symptoms.

Am I at risk?

You are more at risk of getting an STI if you:

- have unprotected sex, or if the condoms breaks for comes off
- have sex with a new partner, casual partners or many partners
- have discharge, pain or sores on your genital area
- have contact with someone else's blood
- or your partner have ever injected drugs

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 body fluids like semen, vaginal fluids and blood from being exchanged. As some STIs can be passed on through genital skin to skin contact, it's important to remember that condoms and dams only protect the area of skin they cover (a condom split along one side and laid flat can also be used as a dam).

You can reduce your risk of getting an STI by:

- planning ahead and carrying condoms/dams if you think there is a chance you might have sex
- talking about safe sex early on, before the heat of the moment, and insisting condoms/dams be used
- using a new condom/dam every time you have sex
- using water-based lubricants with condoms/dams to reduce the risk of breakage
- only having sex with one partner (after you have both been tested for STIs)
- only being intimate in safe ways (such as kissing) or choosing not to have sex

I forgot to use a condom...

If you've had unprotected sex, or if the condom breaks or comes off, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA for STIs as soon as possible. If you do develop symptoms, don't wait and hope they disappear – even if they do, 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 confidential.

Finding out you have an STI can feel isolating, but remember you're not the only one out there and it doesn't mean you can't be sexually active again. Talking to a friend or counsellor can often help.

The Emergency Contraceptive Pill (ECP) can be used to prevent pregnancy (but not STIs) if you've had unprotected sex or if the condom breaks or comes off. It is most effective when taken within 24 hours of having sex. There is some effectiveness for up to 120 hours (5 days) afterwards, however effectiveness decreases as time passes. The ECP is available over the counter at pharmacies, so you don't need to see a doctor to get a prescription.

Common STIs

Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea (bacterial)

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea can infect the urethra, cervix (entrance to the womb) and anus in females, and the penis, anus, testicles and vas deferens in males. They can also infect the throat.

Often people with chlamydia or gonorrhoea have no symptoms and don't know they have an infection. Symptoms, when present, can include a burning sensation when peeing or an unusual discharge from the penis, vagina or anus. If left untreated chlamydia and gonorrhoea can lead to infertility in men and women (when you can't have children without medical help).

Genital Herpes (viral)

Herpes is a virus that most commonly affects the mouth and 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. Herpes is passed on through skin to skin contact with a person who has the virus - this can occur through oral, vaginal or anal sex or other intimate contact.

Genital Warts (viral)

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. Sometimes genital warts are so small that they can't be seen or felt, so it is possible to have them and not know it. Genital warts are sometimes detected when a woman has a Pap smear.

Genital warts are caused by a virus called the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is usually passed on during sexual activity through skin to skin contact or body fluids. If certain types of HPV infect the cervix there is a chance of cervical cancer developing. HPV vaccines are available for young women – talk to a doctor or FPWA for more details. The body usually gets rid of the HPV virus by itself over time.

Other STIs

Syphilis (bacterial)

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.

Syphilis is transmitted through unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex, or direct contact with open sores. In its early stages syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. If left untreated for many years it can cause serious damage to body organs.

Blood-borne viruses

Blood-borne viruses are passed on when blood from a person with the infection enters another person's bloodstream. HIV and hepatitis B and C are all blood-borne viruses and can be passed on through unprotected sexual activity, sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, and use of non-sterilised tattooing and body piercing equipment. It's also a good idea not to share personal items such as razors and toothbrushes.

HIV/AIDS (viral)

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 (viral)

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A, B and C are the three major viruses that can cause viral hepatitis. There is no cure for hepatitis, but vaccines are available for hepatitis A and B. Many people with hepatitis have no symptoms, but some experience yellowing of the skin and eyes, loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, extreme tiredness and pains in their joints.

For more information about syphilis contact the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email sexhelp@fpwa.org.au

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



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