

What you need to know about STDs



What are STDs?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), also known as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). STDs are diseases that are passed from one person to another through vaginal, oral, and anal sex. Many of these STDs don't always cause symptoms or may only cause mild symptoms. Therefore, it is possible to have an infection and not know it. That is why getting an STD test is important if you are having sex.

Sexual contact

Sexually transmitted infections are typically spread through sexual contact. They're caused by bacteria, viruses, or parasites that spread from one person to another in semen, blood, or vaginal and bodily fluids. An STD can be passed through vaginal sex, anal sex, and oral sex.

Nonsexual transmission

Some STDs can also be spread non-sexually through blood transfusions and shared needles. Unsterile body piercings or tattooing equipment can transmit some infections like HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.

Mother to baby

STD transmission can occur from a mother to the baby during pregnancy or childbirth. These infections include gonorrhea, chlamydia, HIV, and syphilis.

Skin-to-skin contact

Infections that can cause genital ulcers, including genital herpes, syphilis, and human papillomavirus (HPV), are often transmitted through skin-to-skin contact with an infected sore.

How do STDs Spread?



Three Main Causes of STDs

Bacteria: including chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis. These 3 bacterial STDs are currently curable.

- Chlamydia is a very common bacterial STD that's treated with antibiotics.
- Gonorrhea is a common STD that can be treated with the right medication. If left untreated, gonorrhea can cause very serious health problems.
- Syphilis is caused by a bacterium called *Treponema pallidum*.

Viruses: including HIV, herpes simplex virus, human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis B virus and so on. These 4 viral STDs can be treated, but can't be cured.

- HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) inhibits your body's ability to fight off viruses, bacteria and fungi that cause disease.
- Herpes simplex virus is caused by a sexually transmitted virus (HSV-2).
- Genital warts are caused by certain strains of the HPV.
- Hepatitis B is a virus that causes inflammation of the liver.

Parasites: such as trichomonas vaginalis or insect-like organisms such as crab lice or scabies mites, all of these are curable.

How to Prevent an STDs?



Abstinence

The most reliable way to avoid infection: don't have sex (i.e., anal, vaginal or oral).

Use condoms

Correct and consistent use of the male latex condom is highly effective in reducing STD transmission, including HIV. Female condoms are also effective and safe. Use a condom every time you have anal, vaginal, or oral sex. If you have latex allergies, synthetic non-latex condoms can be used. But it is important to note that these condoms have higher breakage rates than latex condoms.

Get tested

Get tested for STDs between partners, seek timely testing and treatment if you are at risk. Remember, most STDs have no symptoms. Limit casual sex and use condoms with a new partner.

Limit your number of sexual partners

Risk of STDS increases as number of sexual partners increases.

Vaccination

Vaccines are safe, effective, and recommended ways to prevent hepatitis B and HPV. HPV vaccination is recommended for preteens ages 11 or 12 (or can start at age 9) and everyone through age 26, if not vaccinated already. However, some adults aged 27 through 45 years who are not already vaccinated may decide to get the HPV vaccine after speaking with their doctor about their risk for new HPV infections and the possible benefits of vaccination. HPV vaccination in this age range provides less benefit as more people have already been exposed to HPV.

Don't abuse alcohol or drugs

This increases risky behavior that may lead to STDs.

Can STDs be Treated?

Your doctor can prescribe medicine to cure some STDs, like chlamydia and gonorrhea. Other STDs, like herpes, can't be cured, but you can take medicine to help with the symptoms.

If you are ever treated for an STD, be sure to finish all of your medicine, even if you feel better before you finish it all. Ask about testing and treatment for your partner, too. You and your partner should avoid having sex until you've both been treated.

Otherwise, you may continue to pass the STD back and forth. It is possible to get an STD again (after you've been treated), if you have sex with someone who has an STD.



Pictures from CDC (2022): <https://www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/default.htm>