

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

101

STI stands for Sexually Transmitted Infection. STIs are very common – having one doesn't mean you're dirty or stupid. Having sex involves pleasure but also some risk too. Anyone can be at risk for STIs whether you're straight or LGBTQ or have one sexual partner or more than one sexual partner. Most STIs are treatable or at least manageable.

WHAT ARE THE 3 DIFFERENT KINDS OF STI's?

- **Bacterial** STIs like Gonorrhea and Chlamydia can be cured with medication.
- **Viral** STIs like Herpes and HIV cannot be cured but symptoms can be treated.
- **Parasite** STIs like scabies or pubic lice can be cured with skin medication.

TRANSMISSION

- You must have sex with someone who has an STI in order to get an STI.
- Most STIs are transmitted when vaginal fluid or semen from someone with an STI enter/go inside your vagina, penis, anus or mouth.
- Some STIs, like HIV, are also transmitted when blood from someone with those STIs gets inside your bloodstream through open sores, cuts, tiny tears and veins.
- Herpes and HPV (low-risk HPV and high-risk HPV) are transmitted through skin to skin contact, particularly genital skin to genital skin contact.

SYMPTOMS

- The biggest symptom of all STIs is **no symptom at all**.
- Many STIs share common symptoms such as unusual discharge from the penis or vagina, bumps or sores in and around the genitals.
- What's most important is to pay attention to your body. If something seems unusual to you, get it checked out at a sexual health clinic or with your doctor.

WANT TO REDUCE YOUR RISK? HERE'S SOME THINGS TO TRY:

- If you can, ask partners about their STI status and if they've been tested. Get tested yourself each time you and/or your partner has a new sexual partner.
- Masturbate alone or with a partner.
- Use condoms for vaginal or anal sex with a penis or dildo.
- Use gloves for vaginal or anal sex with fingers.
- Use condoms cut up one side or dams for oral-vaginal or oral-anal sex.
- There are vaccines to prevent Hep B and some strains of HPV. Talk to your health care provider for more information.
- Using condoms, dams and gloves is best but it can also help to: use withdrawal (pull out), avoid having sex when you're menstruating, don't floss/brush your teeth just before oral sex and avoid sex when you're really drunk or high.

TESTING

- Getting tested is a good way to take care of yourself and your partners. You may want to get tested when you or your partner(s) have a new partner(s).
 - Some STIs like HIV, syphilis and Hepatitis B are tested by taking your blood.
 - Other STIs like Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea are tested in women by a vaginal exam and in men, by a urine test.
 - Herpes is tested by taking a swab (a Q-tip) of the sore and low-risk HPV (genital warts) is tested by a healthcare provider's visual examination so you have to have a visible outbreak of sores or warts to get tested.
 - A Pap smear test can detect the possibility of high-risk HPV (i.e. abnormal cells and cervical cancer) in women. All women who have sex with women, with men or with both should have a pap test every year.
- STIs have testing "windows" which means you have to wait a period of time after having sex before you can get an accurate test.
 - For the most common ones, it's 2-3 weeks before you can get tested. For HIV, you have to wait 3 months.
 - For Herpes and genital warts (low-risk HPV), you can only be tested when you have a visible outbreak of sores or warts
- Be sure to ask the healthcare provider what you are being tested for. Don't assume you have been tested for something (for example, a pap test is not an STI test). If you want to be tested for something in particular, ask explicitly.
- Some STIs are reportable, which means if you test positive, anonymous follow-up with your past partners may be required. Talk to the healthcare provider about this before you get tested.
- Each clinic books STI testing appointments differently. Ask the clinic for details.

TREATMENT

- If you get an STI that can be cured, the treatment is usually easy such as an antibiotic or topical treatment.
- If the STI you have cannot be cured, like Herpes or HIV, you can get treatment to reduce your symptoms and take care of yourself.
- If you don't get tested and treated, there can be serious consequences.

REMEMBER

- It's your right to get STI testing and to know what you are being testing for.
- Most STIs are curable or at least manageable; it's no fun to have an STI but it doesn't mean the end of your sex life if you test positive for one.
- Because many people can have STIs for a long time and not know it, it's not always easy to tell who you got the STI from. If you test positive for an STI, don't assume it's your current sexual partner(s).

WANT TO GET TESTED? HAVE OTHER QUESTIONS?

- Planned Parenthood Toronto offers testing for youth 13-29 years old: (416) 961-0113 or www.ppt.on.ca
- The Bay Centre for Birth Control offers testing for people of all ages: (416) 351-3700 or <http://www.womenscollegehospital.ca/programs/program65.html>