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The National Women's Health Information Center

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## Frequently Asked Questions about Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Overview

### What are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)? Why do women need to be concerned about them?

STDs, once called *venereal diseases*, are among the most common diseases in the United States. STDs are diseases that you get by having sexual contact (vaginal, oral, or anal) with someone who already has an STD. Caused by a number of bacteria and viruses, more than 20 STDs affect both women and men. While some STDs can be cured, other STDs are life long (can't be cured). STDs can affect a person's physical health, emotional health, and quality of life. While rare, STDs can cause life-threatening conditions, particularly when they are not treated. Experts believe that having an STD can increase a person's chances for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

It is very common for women to have no symptoms with STDs, mostly in the early stages of illness. This can result in not getting treatment until the illness is severe, when symptoms do become present. Not getting treated early can cause serious problems like infertility (not being able to get pregnant). Some STDs can also be passed, during pregnancy or birth, to a baby. These are some reasons why it is so important for women to learn about STDs – the ways they are spread, their symptoms, how they can be treated, and how they can be prevented. This FAQ gives an overview of the most common STDs that affect women. Click on the STDs at the top of the page for more detailed information.

### What are the most important things for a woman to know about STDs?

Here is what you need to know about STDs:

- **STDs affect everyone.** STDs affect women and men of all ages, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and income levels. Teenagers and young adults get STDs more often than any other age group. This is because they tend to have sex more often and have more sex partners.
- **The number of people getting STDs is going up.** The number of people getting STDs has gone up over the last 20 years, and the numbers continue to rise. This is due, in part, to young people becoming sexually active at earlier ages and marrying later. And today, sexually active people tend to have more than one sex partner during their lives. This can end up increasing a person's chances of being exposed to an STD.

- **You can have an STD, have no symptoms, and still pass it to another person.** Much of the time STDs cause no symptoms, especially in women. When and if symptoms develop, they may be confused with symptoms of other diseases that aren't STDs. Even if you have no symptoms of an STD, you can still pass the infection on to another person. This is why it is so important to get tested. Talk with your health care provider about getting tested for STDs, particularly if you have more than one sex partner. Remember, you don't have to have symptoms to get tested.
- **STDs can cause life long and severe health problems.** Health problems tend to be more severe and more frequent for women than men. This may be because women most often have no symptoms and seek care only when serious problems develop. STDs can affect women in different ways.
  - Some STDs are linked to cancer of the cervix. One STD, *human papillomavirus* (HPV) causes genital warts and cervical and other genital cancers.
  - A mother can pass an STD to her baby before, during, or right after birth. Some of these infections can be easily cured. But others can harm a newborn, causing life long damage or even death.
- **STDs are most successfully treated if caught early.** There are tests to tell if you have an STD and many treatments for STDs. When you have an STD, getting treated right away is best. It is important to know that even with treatment that cures an STD, you can still get the STD again.

### What are the most common STDs?

Common STDs are listed in the chart below.

STD	Symptoms
Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)	Vaginal discharge that can be white, gray or thin and have an odor. Burning or pain when urinating. Itching around the outside of the vagina. Can have no symptoms.
Chlamydia	Most people have no symptoms. Vaginal discharge. Burning when urinating.
Genital Herpes	Small red bumps, blisters or open sores on the penis, vagina or areas close by.

STD	Symptoms
	<p>Vaginal discharge.</p> <p>Fever, headache and muscle aches.</p> <p>Pain when urinating.</p> <p>Itching, burning or swollen glands in genital area.</p> <p>Pain in legs, buttocks or genital area.</p> <p>Can have no symptoms.</p>
Gonorrhea	<p>Women often have no symptoms.</p> <p>Pain or burning when urinating.</p> <p>Yellowish and sometimes bloody vaginal discharge.</p> <p>Bleeding between menstrual periods.</p> <p>Heavy bleeding with periods.</p> <p>Pain when having sex.</p> <p>Lower abdominal pain.</p>
Hepatitis	<p>Mild fever.</p> <p>Headache and muscle aches.</p> <p>Tiredness.</p> <p>Loss of appetite.</p> <p>Nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.</p> <p>Dark-colored urine and pale bowel movements.</p> <p>Stomach pain.</p> <p>Skin and whites of eyes turning yellow (jaundice).</p> <p>Can have no symptoms.</p>
HIV Infection and AIDS	<p>Can have no symptoms for 10 years or more.</p> <p>Lack of energy or fatigue.</p> <p>Weight loss.</p>

STD	Symptoms
	<p>Frequent low-grade fevers and night sweats.</p> <p>Frequent yeast infections (in the mouth).</p> <p>Skin rashes or flaky skin that is hard to get rid of.</p> <p>Women can have vaginal yeast infections and other STDs; pelvic inflammatory disease (PID); and menstrual cycle changes.</p>
Human Papillomavirus (HPV)	<p>Genital warts that sometimes can be hard to see.</p> <p>Can have no symptoms.</p>
Syphilis	<p>Painless sores (chancres) and skin rash.</p> <p>Mild fever.</p> <p>Feeling very tired.</p> <p>Headache and sore throat.</p> <p>Hair loss.</p> <p>Swollen lymph glands throughout the body.</p> <p>Can have no symptoms.</p>
Trichomoniasis	<p>Yellow, green or gray vaginal discharge with a strong odor.</p> <p>Discomfort during sex and when urinating.</p> <p>Irritation and itching of the genital area.</p> <p>Lower abdominal pain (rare).</p>

STD	Symptoms
Vaginal Yeast Infections	<p>Itching, burning and irritation of the vagina.</p> <p>Pain when urinating or with intercourse.</p> <p>Cottage-cheesy looking vaginal discharge.</p>

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## Are there tests for STDs?

Yes, there are a number of tests for STDs. And, the only way to be sure you have an STD, is to see your health care provider for testing. Your provider may start with one or all of the following exams:

- A physical exam to look for symptoms of an STD, such as swollen lymph nodes and growths or irritations inside the throat or anus or in the genital area.
- A visual exam to inspect your skin for rashes, growths or sores, especially the area around the genitals.
- A pelvic exam to look at the inside of your vagina (birth canal) and cervix (opening to the uterus, or womb) and to feel your internal organs for any inflammation or growths on the uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tubes (tubes that carry eggs from the ovaries to the uterus).

Tests may be ordered to confirm the presence of bacteria or viruses that cause STDs. Your provider will take a sample of fluid or tissue from the vaginal, anal or genital area and send it to a lab for analysis. Blood tests are also done for some STDs. While some women may have some discomfort with taking samples, most women find the process painless and quick. Results from the lab are most often received within a week or less.

## How can I keep from getting STDs?

There are things you can do to protect yourself from STDs:

- The best way to prevent any STD is to practice abstinence (don't have sex). Delaying having sex for the first time is another way to reduce your chances of getting an STD. Studies show that the younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more likely it is that they will get an STD. The risk of getting an STD also becomes greater over time, as the number of a person's sex partners increases.
- Have a sexual relationship with one partner who doesn't have any STDs, where you are faithful to each other (meaning that you only have sex with each other and no one else).
- Practice "safer sex." This means protecting yourself with a condom EVERY time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.

For vaginal sex, use a latex male condom or a female polyurethane condom. For anal sex, use a latex male condom. If needed, use only water based lubricants with male and female condoms. For oral sex, use a *dental dam* – a device used by dentists, made out of a rubbery material, that you place over the opening to the vagina before having oral sex. If you don't have a dental dam, you can cut an unlubricated male condom open and place it over the opening to the vagina.

Even though it may be embarrassing, if you don't know how to use a male or female condom, talk to your health care provider. The biggest reason condoms don't work is because they are not used correctly.

- Be aware that condoms don't provide complete protection against STDs. But, they do decrease your chances of getting an STD. Know also that other methods of birth control, like birth control pills, shots, implants, or diaphragms don't protect you from STDs. If you use one of these methods, be sure to also use a condom every time you have sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. Your risk of getting an STD increases with the number of partners you have.
- Don't share needles or drug injection equipment. This includes illegal drugs like heroin and cocaine and legal drugs like steroids and vitamins. If you get a tattoo or body piercing, make sure the needles are sterile (clean).
- Learn how to talk with your partner about STDs and using condoms. It's up to you to make sure you are protected. The organizations in the "For more information" at the end of this FAQ have tips for talking with your partner. You can also talk with your health care provider about this.
- When you are sexually active, especially if you have more than one partner, get regular exams for STDs from a health care provider. Many tests for STDs can be done during an exam. And, the earlier an STD is found, the easier it is to treat.
- Learn the common symptoms of STDs. Seek medical help right away if you think you may have an STD.
- Don't douche. Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that protects you from infection. This can increase your risk for getting some STDs.

## **What should I do if I have an STD?**

Sometimes a person may be too scared or embarrassed to ask for information or help. But, keep in mind most STDs are easy to treat. Early treatment of STDs is important. The quicker you seek treatment, the less likely the STD will cause you severe harm. And the sooner you tell your sex partners about having an STD, the less likely they are to spread the disease to others (because they can get treated). For pregnant women, early treatment also reduces the chances of passing the STD to a baby.

Doctors, local health departments, and STD and family planning clinics have information about STDs. The American Social Health Association (ASHA) has free information and keeps lists of clinics and doctors who provide treatment for STDs. Call ASHA at (800) 227-8922. You can get information from the phone line without leaving your name.

If you have an STD or think you may have an STD:

- Get it treated right away. Studies suggest that having an STD increases your risk for getting infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- Follow your health care provider's orders and finish all the medicine that you are given. Even if the symptoms go away, you still need to finish all of the medicine.
- Avoid having any sexual activity while you are being treated for an STD.
- Be sure to tell your sexual partners, so they can be treated too.



- Get a follow-up test to make sure that the infection has been cured (for those STDs that can be cured; some are life long infections).
- If you are pregnant, be sure to tell your doctor. Some medicines aren't safe to take when pregnant, and you may need a different drug to treat the STD.
- If you are breastfeeding, talk with your doctor about the risk of passing the STD to your baby while breastfeeding.

This FAQ was adapted from STD fact sheets from the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

## For More Information...

You can find out more about sexually transmitted diseases by contacting the National Women's Health Information Center (800) 994-9662 or the following organizations:

### **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)**

National Prevention Information Network

Phone Number(s): (800) 458-5231

Internet Address: <http://www.cdcnpin.org>

### **CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline**

Phone Number(s): (800) 227-8922

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org/NSTD/index.html>

### **National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention**

Internet Address: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/od/nchstp.html>

### **National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases**

Phone Number(s): (301) 496-5717

Internet Address: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov>

### **American Social Health Association**

Phone Number(s): (800) 783-9877

Internet Address: <http://www.ashastd.org>

### **American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists**

Phone Number(s): (800) 762-2264

Internet Address: <http://www.acog.org>

### **American Academy of Family Physicians**

Phone Number(s): (913) 906-6000

Internet Address: <http://www.familydoctor.org>

### **Planned Parenthood Federation of America**

Phone Number(s) (800) 230-7526

Internet Address: <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>

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