

Serious

Chapter 21

Sexually Transmitted Infections

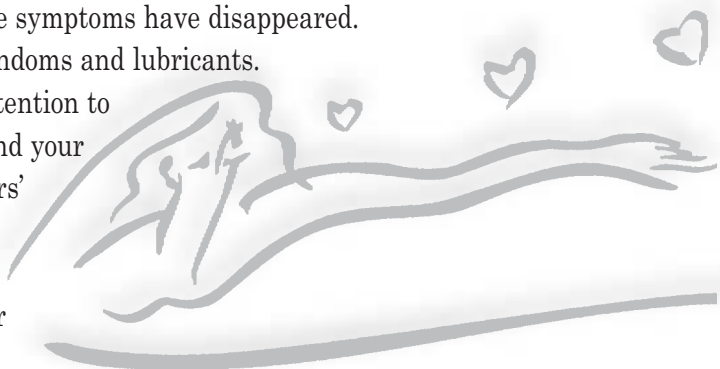
Consequences

More than 65 million people in the United States have an incurable sexually transmitted infection (STI), and there are 15 million new cases each year. Some STIs can lead to long-term, serious consequences for women. The only sure way to prevent STIs is to avoid sexual activities that can transmit the infection, including vaginal, anal, and oral sex. The next best preventive measure is the use of a latex or polyurethane male condom or female condom with the appropriate amount of lubricant every time you have sex. Using a dental dam for oral sex will also decrease the chances of transmission.

Bacterial infections can usually be treated with antibiotics. It is important that you take all of the medication prescribed, even if your symptoms have disappeared. If you stop too soon, the infection may recur. Viral infections, such as genital herpes, typically can't be cured, but can often be controlled.

Here are some tips to help you prevent reinfection.

- Know your sexual partner.
- Both partners with the STI must be treated often.
- Avoid intercourse until all the antibiotic has been taken and the symptoms have disappeared.
- Use condoms and lubricants.
- Pay attention to your and your partners' bodies, and look for



any unusual bumps, sores, discharge, and rashes.

If you have been diagnosed with one STI, it is a good idea to be tested for others. Chlamydia and gonorrhea, for example, often occur together. Ask your doctor to run tests for gonorrhea and chlamydia when you get your pap smear since some doctors do not routinely include these tests in a checkup.

See your doctor immediately if you have any possible warning signs of an STI, including—

- Any open sores, red or white bumps or rashes, or liquid-filled blisters—no matter how small—in your genital area.
- Redness or swelling in your genital area.
- Any unusual change in the amount, color, smell, or consistency of your vaginal discharge.
- Pain in your pelvis or abdomen, with or without nausea and/or vomiting.
- Pain, soreness, irritation, or other discomfort during intercourse or bleeding after intercourse.
- Fever, loss of appetite, fatigue, or swollen lymph nodes in your groin or neck.
- Unusually severe menstrual cramps.
- Recurring yeast infections or other infections.

HIV and hepatitis B and C infections can be transmitted sexually or spread by other means.

Chlamydia.

Chlamydia is one of the most common STIs in the United States.

It is a bacterial infection that is commonly transmitted through

vaginal, anal, and, sometimes, oral sex.

More than three-fourths of infected women have no symptoms. In those women

with symptoms, they include an abnormal vaginal discharge, a burning sensation during urination, pain or pressure in the pelvic area, and/or pain during or bleeding after intercourse. Chlamydia is the primary cause of pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to infertility, tubal pregnancy, and chronic pelvic pain.

Gonorrhea.

Gonorrhea is a highly contagious bacterial infection, which can be transmitted through vaginal, anal, or oral sex. The majority of early gonorrhea infections in women have no symptoms which allow the infection to spread and often produce pelvic inflammatory disease. If symptoms do appear, early symptoms may include a green or yellow-green discharge from the vagina or rectum and burning or itching during urination, abdominal pain, and abnormal menstrual bleeding. Left untreated, gonorrhea can spread throughout your body, causing arthritis, heart disease, and/or brain damage. Gonorrhea also increases the transmission of HIV (see page 114).

Syphilis.

Syphilis is a bacterial STI that is potentially life threatening. In addition to being transmitted by vaginal, anal, or oral sex, syphilis is also transmitted through contact with syphilis sores on the body of an infected person. The number of new cases of syphilis dropped sharply when antibiotics were developed in the 1950s. However, there has been a dramatic nationwide increase in the numbers of reported cases in recent years. This has led doctors to return to regular screening of pregnant women to prevent transmission of the disease to the fetus.

In the initial stage of syphilis, there typically are small, raised, smooth, painless sores. Although they most often appear on the genitals, sores may also appear on the tongue, lips, breast, or rectum. There may also be swelling in nearby lymph nodes. The sores usually heal without treatment. The second stage begins 2 – 6 weeks after the sores heal. Signs may include fever, headache and aching joints, and a skin rash. Then the infected person may

go through another period during which there are no signs or symptoms. If syphilis isn't treated, it can spread throughout the body and into the blood system and brain. The third stage of syphilis occurs later and may cause nerve and brain damage, blindness, heart abnormalities, and death.

Genital Warts.

Genital warts are a very common, highly contagious STI caused by strains of the human papillomavirus (HPV), which are transmitted through vaginal, anal, or oral sex. The warts are flat or raised, pink, white, or brown areas on the genitals or anus. These painless warts may appear as a few tiny bumps or in clusters (described as resembling cauliflower). The strains of HPV that cause genital warts are not likely to be associated with cervical cancer (and, possibly, other types of cancer) as other high-risk types of HPV.

Genital warts can't be cured because they are caused by a virus. Freezing, surgical removal, injection of medication into the wart, or the application of various topical creams are used to destroy or remove them. In addition there are now prescription-medications available to treat HPV infections. As with many viral infections, genital warts can recur. Both partners should be treated, and a condom should be used during intercourse to reduce the risk of recurrence.

Genital Herpes.

The term herpes simply means an infection by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). Although HSV-1 usually causes cold sores and fever blisters around the mouth and HSV-2 usually causes genital

Use
Condo



herpes, both viruses can cause infections on the genitals or in the mouth. Genital herpes typically appears as painful sores, which resemble blisters, on the genitals; however, infection is often not associated with any signs or symptoms. Herpes is highly contagious and can be transmitted by direct (skin-to-skin) contact with the affected area, even when there are no visible signs of the infection. The disease is even more contagious when there are visible sores. Active genital herpes may increase your risk of cervical cancer and of becoming infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

Avoid kissing or sharing towels, eating utensils, or drinking glasses with anyone who has cold sores or fever blisters. Don't share towels with someone who has genital herpes. Completely avoid vaginal, anal, and oral sex when you or your partner has any

symptoms of herpes. However, since infection can still be transmitted, even when you have no symptoms, always be sure to use a latex or polyurethane condom and/or a dental dam during sex. Use of a condom during an outbreak may not protect you since it may not cover the area where the sores are

present. Genital herpes is never permanently cured, but it can be controlled with oral medication.

Hepatitis B and C.

Hepatitis B is a potentially deadly infection caused by the hepatitis B virus, which attacks the liver. Some people are carriers of the virus, that is, they have no symptoms but can transmit it to others. Hepatitis B can be spread through—

- Sexual contact.
- Contaminated needles used for injecting drugs.
- Contaminated medical or dental instruments that pierce



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the skin (rare).

- Any blood to blood contact with an infected person.

About one-third of the people with hepatitis B have no symptoms. Those people who have symptoms may experience mild or severe—

- Headaches and muscle aches.
- Fever.
- Fatigue.
- Loss of appetite.
- Vomiting.
- Diarrhea.

Symptoms in advanced stages of hepatitis B infection include abdominal pain, dark urine, and jaundice (yellowing of the skin and whites of the eyes).

Most hepatitis B infections clear up on their own within one to two months. Those that persist may lead to permanent liver damage. There is no cure or effective treatment of the infection, but medication can help ease some of the symptoms. There is a vaccine to prevent hepatitis B infection, which should be given to newborn infants and to any person who have not been immunized.

Hepatitis C is caused by the hepatitis C virus. It is not usually considered an STI because it is rarely spread through sexual contact. Hepatitis C is transmitted by injection of any drug, with a contaminated needle, or through contaminated blood. Screening of blood and blood products has greatly reduced the spread of hepatitis C through transfusions. Hepatitis C is like hepatitis B in that there is no effective cure or treatment once a person is infected. Hepatitis C is *unlike* hepatitis B in that there is no vaccine to protect you against hepatitis C at this time. However, there may be a hepatitis C vaccine available in the near future.

It is possible for you to be infected with the hepatitis C virus for many years without having any symptoms, but the virus will show up in a blood test. An estimated 80% of people with hepatitis C

have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they typically include—

- Jaundice.
- Fatigue.
- Loss of appetite.
- Nausea.
- Abdominal pain.
- Dark urine.

HIV/AIDS.

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS), which is now a treatable disease. In the United States, AIDS first appeared in homosexual men; however, women now represent one of the fastest growing groups of people with HIV. AIDS is now one of the leading causes of death in American women aged 25 to 49.

HIV can be transmitted through—

- Vaginal, and/or anal sexual contact (primary method of transmission).
- Sharing needles with an infected person, usually to inject drugs.
- Pregnancy and breast feeding.

Oral sex has a small risk of transmission.

NOTE: Donated blood is screened for HIV, making it almost impossible to become infected with HIV through a blood transfusion

HIV is **not** transmitted through—

- Nonsexual contact, such as hugging or shaking hands.
- Kissing.
- Sharing water fountains, toilets, or swimming pools with infected persons.
- Being bitten by an insect or animal.

- Donating blood or having a blood test.

HIV attacks the immune system, weakening your ability to fight infections and some cancers. An infected person may have no symptoms for many years, while the virus works to weaken the immune system. Someone with HIV may have a variety of symptoms and have recurring infections long before actually developing AIDS. Symptoms may include—

- Enlarged lymph nodes in the neck, armpits, or groin that last three months or longer.
- Weight loss.
- Fatigue.
- Frequent fever or sweats, especially at night.
- Ongoing yeast infections in the vagina, mouth, and throat.
- Frequent, severe recurrences of genital herpes.
- Series of infections or diseases that take advantage of the weakened immune system.

HIV is detected by a blood test for the antibodies the body produces to fight the infection. Testing is widely available; however, there is a time lag between the time of infection and the appearance of antibodies in the blood. Because of this lag time, it is a good idea to be retested in three months.

Any time you take part in any high-risk sexual behavior, you may contract HIV. Always use a male or female condom when you have sexual contact, even when you are intimate with only one person. Your sex partner may have other sexual partners or may be an intravenous drug user. Don't take chances! For women who may have a known exposure to HIV during a sexual contact or as the result of rape, the chance of getting an HIV infection is greatly decreased if your doctor starts you on medication within two hours of the exposure.

Although there is no cure for HIV infection or AIDS, there have been recent advances in developing medications that can

slow the disease in most people. Transmission from an infected mother to her fetus or unborn infant can be considerably reduced by appropriate treatment during pregnancy and labor and after delivery.

Additional resources include—

Sexually Transmitted Diseases: A Physician Tells You What You Need to Know by Lisa Marr. Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

Sexual Health Information for Teens: Health Tips about Sexual Development, Human Reproduction, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases by Deborah A. Stanley. Omnigraphics, Inc., 2003.

The First Year—HIV: An Essential Guide for the Newly Diagnosed by Brett Grodeck. Marlowe & Company, 2003.