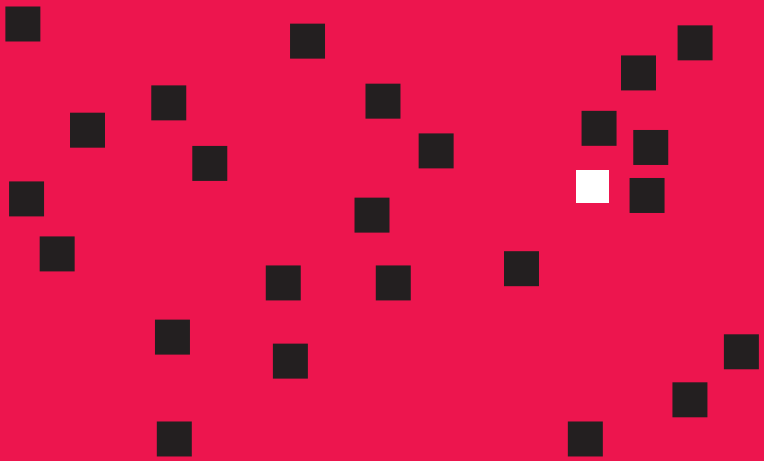
SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES



Introduction

STD is short for Sexually Transmitted Disease. STDs are diseases that are spread through sexual intimacy such as vaginal intercourse, oral sex, anal sex or sometimes skin-to-skin contact.

This booklet explains different types of Sexually Transmitted Diseases. It describes how they are spread, treated and, most importantly, prevented. Some STDs have very obvious symptoms but many have mild or no symptoms.

Some people believe that anyone with an STD is unclean, bad or immoral; that an STD is punishment for sex; or that only uneducated or poor people get STDs. None of these beliefs are true—anyone who is sexually active can get an STD.

Invisible STDs

Get tested! Don't wait for symptoms to appear because many STDs don't have obvious symptoms. If you are sexually active, STD tests should be part of your regular check-up. But if you have any concerns at all that you may have been exposed to an STD, see your doctor or a local public health clinic right away and ask to be tested.

Get treated! Untreated STDs can cause serious problems for the person infected. If they aren't treated, they can also be spread to another person, and a pregnant woman can pass the disease to her fetus. It is also common for people to have more than one STD at the same time. People with an STD are at much greater risk for getting HIV, and people with HIV who get another STD can get much sicker than someone without HIV.

Be smart! If you find out that you have an STD, don't have sex with anyone else until you have been treated. Current and recent partners should be told that they have been exposed so they can be tested and treated, also. This can be hard to do and your health care provider can help you.

Never try to cure an STD yourself with douches, enemas, creams or other over-the-counter treatments.

Getting an STD happens to millions of people so you don't have to feel bad about yourself. Get tested, get treated and learn how to prevent it from happening again.

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Preventing STDs

Don't have sex.

Abstinence is the surest way to avoid getting an STD.

Be faithful.

Have sex with only one other person whom you trust. Sexual fidelity with someone who is not infected means that you won't get an STD from them and they won't get one from you.

Use condoms.

They aren't 100% effective but, if you choose to have sex, latex condoms can be a very good protection against STDs. Learn how to use condoms correctly and use a new one every time you have sex.

Don't mix drugs and alcohol with sex.

Getting drunk or high can affect your ability to make smart decisions about sex.

Have fewer partners.

The more people you have sex with, the greater your chances of getting an STD. Go with new partners to get tested.

Don't use IV street drugs, and *never* share needles.

Bacterial STDs

Some STDs are caused by bacteria ("germs"). Bacterial STDs can be treated and cured with antibiotics. Your health care provider will prescribe medication and instructions on how to take it. You should take all of it and not stop when you start feeling better. Stopping your medicine too soon can make the bacteria that caused the STD harder to cure.

It is common for sexual partners to pass the bacteria back and forth, so treatment usually includes not having sex until all partners are cured.

DID YOU KNOW...

Most people who have chlamydia don't know that they have it because they don't have symptoms.

Chlamydia (the silent STD)

Chlamydia is the most common reportable STD in the United States and it can be very serious. Untreated, chlamydia can cause sterility in both men and women. Babies born to mothers with chlamydia can get eye and lung infections. Chlamydia is a major cause of Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) in women, a painful infection that can lead to infertility.

People with chlamydia are much more likely to get HIV if they have sex with an infected person.

Signs and Symptoms

Unfortunately, most people who have chlamydia don't know that they have it because they don't have symptoms. If they do have symptoms, men might have a burning feeling with urination or a slight discharge, and women may have a little more discharge than normal. Woman may also have a burning feeling or abdominal pain.

Testing for Chlamydia

A few cells are swabbed from the genital area and examined, or a urine test can be used. Neither method is painful.

Treatment

Chlamydia is easily treated with oral antibiotics. Don't have sex until your medicine is finished. Because it is so easily spread, partners should be treated also or you may get it again. Your doctor may want to re-test you after treatment to make sure you haven't been reinfected.

Gonorrhea ("drip" or "clap")

Gonorrhea is a very common STD caused by a germ known as gonococcus. It can be spread through vaginal, anal and oral sex. If it is not treated, gonorrhea can lead to a type of arthritis and infertility. Women can get Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID). Babies born to infected mothers can become blind.

People with gonorrhea are much more likely to get HIV if they have sex with an infected person. People with both HIV and gonorrhea are much more likely to spread HIV.

Signs and Symptoms

Most men have symptoms a few days after sex. They often have painful urination and pus dripping from the end of their penis. Most women have no symptoms at all. There may be some yellowish vaginal discharge but it can be hard to tell the difference from normal discharge.

A sore throat and/or sores on the tongue are symptoms of oral gonorrhea, and rectal discharge and itching can result from anal sex with an infected partner.

Testing for Gonorrhea

Samples of discharge are taken from the affected area and tested. Some clinics use a urine test. Because there are different types of gonorrhea, the sample will be tested to find out which medication is best. You should be tested for chlamydia at the same time, because about half of all people who have gonorrhea also have chlamydia.

Treatment

Depending upon what type of gonorrhea is found, you will either receive a shot of antibiotic or be given antibiotic pills to take. Gonorrhea has developed resistance to many common antibiotics, so it's especially important to take all of your medicine, even after you feel completely well and all your symptoms go away.

Syphilis ("pox" or "syph")

Syphilis was the first disease to be identified as an STD. It is passed through contact with the sores of an infected person. It is much more common in men than in women but, like many STDs, it can be very serious if not treated. It can be passed to a fetus during the last 5 months of pregnancy.

People with syphilis are much more likely to get HIV if they have sex with an infected person. People with HIV will get sicker faster if they get syphilis.

Signs and Symptoms

Syphilis is a complicated and serious disease and symptoms vary depending on the stage of the disease.

Primary (first) stage

About 3 weeks after sex, a single, painless sore called a chancre (shan-ker) appears on the body. They are usually on the penis, anus, cervix or mouth, but they can appear anywhere. These chancres can look like sores from other diseases, including other STDs. With syphilis there is only one sore, it doesn't hurt and it is usually hard around the edges. The sore is very contagious, which means you can give other people syphilis.

Second stage
If syphilis isn't treated during the primary stage, it moves to the secondary stage. In 6 or 7 weeks, infected people develop a rash, usually on the body and the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. This rash is contagious. You may feel like you have the flu. These symptoms go away in about 2 weeks but, if you aren't treated, serious damage can start happening inside your brain, heart and other organs.

Third or latent stage
There are no symptoms and you aren't contagious, but the hidden damage gets worse until treatment or death.

Testing for Syphilis

The sores can be tested and there are blood tests. Your health care provider may do more than one type of test or repeat tests. People treated for syphilis must return to their clinic or doctor for additional tests.

Treatment

Syphilis is cured with a large dose of antibiotics given by a shot. Treatment stops the silent damage, and if a woman with syphilis is also pregnant, she can be treated and cured.

Viral STDs

Some STDs are caused by viruses. Many viruses can be managed with special drugs called anti-virals but they cannot be cured with antibiotics. A few viral STDs can be prevented with vaccines. The body's immune system naturally gets rid of some viruses and others, like HIV, live in the body for a very long time.

DID YOU KNOW...?

HPV is very contagious and even people with no visible warts can give them to others.

HPV (genital warts)

HPV is short for Human Papilloma Virus. It is a virus that lives on the skin and causes warts. There are many different kinds and they are spread by skin-to-skin contact with someone who has HPV. Some are passed on mostly through sex. It is very contagious, and even people with no visible warts can give them to others.

HPV can be a very serious STD for women because some types of HPV are linked to cervical cancer. Only a few women will develop cervical cancer but all women should have a regular Pap test to check for cell changes.

Recently, a vaccine became available that prevents the most common kinds of HPV in women, including the two that cause most cervical cancer. It is recommended for girls 11 or 12 years old, but it is available for females between the ages of 9 and 26. It is especially important for females to get vaccinated *before* their first sexual contact. Even if you have been diagnosed with HPV, you can still get the shots to prevent infection by other forms of the virus. Women and parents of girls should talk to their health care providers for more information.

The HPV vaccine is not available for males yet.

Signs and Symptoms

Few people notice any signs of infection. Genital warts can grow on or inside the penis, on the cervix, inside the vagina or anywhere in the genital area. They can also grow on the thighs, anal area or, more rarely, in the mouth. HPV can appear weeks, months or even years after contact with someone who is infected. Three months is the average.

Genital warts can look darker, lighter or the same as skin color. They can be raised, flat, soft, hard, small or large. They can appear as a single wart or in groups.

Testing for HPV

If there are visible warts, the doctor will look at them and decide if you should be tested for HPV or other conditions that can look like HPV.

All women who are or have been sexually active should have regular Pap tests, which involve taking some cells from the cervix to check for abnormal cells.

Treatment

Because it is a virus, HPV cannot be cured, but the warts can be treated. About 25% of people who are treated will develop warts again, and 30% of all warts will disappear without any treatment.

There are several ways the warts can be treated. Choices include freezing or burning the warts, and surgery with or without lasers. Never try to treat warts yourself without seeing a health care professional first.

Genital Herpes (HSV)

Herpes is a common infection caused by a virus. It can infect both the mouth and the genitals. Herpes Type 1 (HSV-1) causes most mouth sores that are called “fever blisters” or “cold sores.” Type 2 Herpes (HSV-2) causes most genital and anal sores. Both types can infect either place. Having one type does not mean you can’t get the other type.

Most herpes is spread by people who don’t know they have it because they have no symptoms or have very mild symptoms. It is passed on when sexual contact is made with the sores, but herpes can also be spread when there are no sores. This can happen through vaginal intercourse, or oral sex or anal sex.

Having herpes can make it easy to get other STDs, especially HIV. Condoms can help reduce the chance of getting other STDs or passing it on, but only if the infected area is completely covered by the condom. It is safest to never have sex when there are sores present.

It can be a serious problem if you get herpes for the first time while you are pregnant or have sores when you give birth. Tell your doctor if you or any of your sex partners have ever had herpes.

Signs and Symptoms

Not everyone has noticeable signs. Blister-like sores that itch, burn or tingle may appear 2–21 days after sex with an infected person. The sores can be very painful and sometimes people feel like they have the flu. The sores usually last from 1–3 weeks the first time that they appear. Scabs form and the sores heal but the virus stays hidden in the body.

More sores may appear later, but not always. It is different for every person. Later outbreaks are usually less painful, heal faster and there are fewer sores.

Testing for Herpes

The fluid from new sores is very easily tested. Blood tests can also be done.

Treatment

Because it is a virus, herpes cannot be cured. It can be treated with medicine that reduces the number and severity of future outbreaks. These medicines should not be taken if you are pregnant, so be sure to talk with your doctor.

Hepatitis B (HBV)

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. It can be caused by many things, including drugs, toxins, alcohol and viruses.

Hepatitis B (HBV) is a sexually transmitted virus that attacks the liver. Most people recover and their bodies get rid of the virus. But Hepatitis B may cause serious liver damage or even liver cancer. Fortunately, there is a vaccine that prevents HBV.

Some people who are carriers may have no symptoms, but they can spread the infection to others.

It is easy to get HBV if you have sex or share needles with an infected person. Touching an infected person's sore or cut, or sharing a razor, toothbrush or nail clipper can put you at risk. Even tiny amounts of blood or other body fluids can spread the virus. You cannot get it through food, water or casual contact.

Women can pass this virus on to their babies during childbirth.

Signs and Symptoms

Many people with the virus have no symptoms at all, but are still contagious. Symptoms can include yellow color in the skin and eyes, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, joint pain and extreme tiredness.

Testing for Hepatitis B

Your health care provider will use a blood test to check for this disease.

Treatment

There is a vaccine that prevents Hepatitis B, but it cannot be cured. There are drugs for people who have Hepatitis B that help decrease the chance of liver damage. Some of these drugs have serious side effects, so discuss them with your doctor.

It is recommended that all babies and teenagers get the Hepatitis B vaccine. Adults who have high risk sex, or have jobs (such as health care) or other factors that put them at risk should also get the shots.

HIV/AIDS

(acquired immune deficiency syndrome)

AIDS is caused by a virus called Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). HIV is in the blood, semen or vaginal fluids of an infected person. It can be spread during intercourse, or oral sex or anal sex. People who share needles for shooting drugs can spread infection.

A baby can get it from a mother who has the virus. It is not spread through casual contact.

HIV can get into another person's blood stream through tiny breaks in the skin. Sores and the thin, wet skin in the genital area are easy ways for the virus to get in. People with other STDs that cause sores or rashes are at greater risk for getting HIV.

Often, HIV is spread by a person who doesn't know they are infected. People can have it for a long time without looking or feeling sick. If they don't know they have HIV, they can pass it on to their sex partners or to anyone who shares their needles.

The blood and organ transplants used in U.S. hospitals are tested and protected from HIV. Blood donation centers use disposable needles. They have never spread HIV.

The virus slowly attacks white blood cells which are part of the body's system for fighting germs. When this system is weak, harmful germs can take over. These infections can lead to AIDS, which is a very late stage of HIV.

Signs and Symptoms

People can have HIV for years without looking or feeling sick. Sometimes, when they first get HIV, they may feel flu-like symptoms but these quickly go away. Later, they may have a fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, severe weight loss, night sweats, diarrhea, swollen glands, cough, sores and yeast infections. If you have any of these symptoms for more than 2 weeks, you should see a doctor.

Testing for HIV

There are different types of tests. Most tests look for antibodies to the virus in a person's blood. For most people these antibodies take 3 months after exposure to appear. So it is best to wait for at least 3 months after the last time you were at risk before taking the test. Sometimes it can take up to 6 months. It would be very unusual to take longer then 6 months to develop antibodies.

Depending upon the type of test, it can take up to 3 weeks to get your results so it is very important that you do not risk further exposures to HIV or other STDs during this

time. And because you could be contagious, you should continue to be abstinent (not have sex) or use condoms.

Treatment

There is no cure for HIV/AIDS right now. But, there are many different medicines that people can take to help the immune system. People with HIV usually take several at a time. Pregnant women with HIV can take drugs that lessen the chances of giving HIV to their babies. Because new treatments are announced frequently, you should talk with your doctor regularly about how they might help you.

People with HIV/AIDS who choose to have sex must always use condoms and tell their partners that they have HIV. Choosing not to practice safer sex puts other people at serious risk and increases your chances of getting another STD.

Parasites

STD parasites are small bugs that either live on or under the skin. Some parasites also live in the wet, warm areas of the body like the genitals. They are extremely common and very easy to spread through intimate contact like sex, but some of them can also be spread through contact with things like bedding.

These STDs are generally more annoying than harmful and can be a challenge to treat. The important thing to remember is that people who get a parasite STD are at more risk of getting one of the more serious STDs.

DID YOU KNOW...

. . . people who get pubic lice should be tested for other STDs.

?

Pubic Lice ("crabs")

Pubic lice are small insects found in the genital area of humans. They are common and found everywhere in the world. Pubic lice are usually spread through sexual contact. They are sometimes spread through contact with bedding, towels or clothing used recently by someone who has pubic lice. It is not possible to get them by sitting on a toilet seat.

Signs and Symptoms

Most people have intense itching, but not everyone. Some people can see the lice and the eggs which are attached to pubic hairs. You may notice small blue spots on your skin or tiny blood spots in your underwear as a result of their bites.

Testing for Pubic Lice

Adult lice are large enough to see with the naked eye, so a doctor's diagnosis is not usually necessary. However, people who get pubic lice should be tested for other STDs.

Treatment

There are shampoos, rinses and lotions that are designed to kill pubic lice. You can buy them in most drugstores. The directions on the package should be followed very carefully. Some products cannot be used by pregnant women or very young children. If there are lice in the eyebrows or lashes, use a product specially made for that purpose.

Treatment
(continued)

Washable clothing and bedding should be washed in hot water and dried in a hot dryer. Dry clean other items that cannot be washed. Things that cannot be dry cleaned or washed can be sealed in a plastic bag for 10 days so that the lice and lice eggs die.

It's important that everyone you have had sex with in the last month be treated also or you will get lice from them again.

Scabies

Scabies is a skin infestation caused by tiny bugs called mites. They are common and found everywhere in the world. Scabies is spread through direct skin-to-skin contact and is easily passed between sexual partners and close household members. The mites live under the skin in the moist folds of the body, especially between the fingers and toes. They also live in the genital areas, under the breasts and armpits.

Signs and Symptoms

They are too small to be seen without a microscope, but the mites cause intense itching and rashes. Small pimple-like spots may be present as well.

Testing for Scabies

Scabies is most commonly diagnosed by looking at the rash. The doctor may take tiny scrapes of skin to look at under a microscope.

Treatment

There are special lotions that kill the mites and their eggs—follow directions carefully. Pregnant women and very young children should not use some kinds of scabies lotions. Talk to your doctor about what's safe. Itching may continue for 2–3 weeks after treatment.

Clothing, bedding and other linens that can be washed should go in the hot cycles for both washers and dryers.

Treatment
(continued)

Items that cannot be put in hot water can be either dry cleaned or sealed in a plastic bag for 3–4 weeks.

Everyone you have had close contact with should be treated at the same time.

Trichomoniasis

("trich" or trichomonas vaginalis)

This common infection is caused by tiny parasites called protozoa. They live in wet areas of the genitals, such as the urethra or vagina. While it is most commonly passed from one person to the next during sex, it can sometimes be spread through genital contact with wet towels, wet toilet seats or wet clothing.

Trich doesn't cause any lasting damage for adults but it can cause pregnant women to have premature or low birth-weight babies.

Signs and Symptoms

Trich causes inflammation. In women, it can cause vaginitis (inflammation in the vagina) and in men it can cause urethritis (inflammation in the urethra).

Like many STDs, people don't always have symptoms. If there are symptoms, they usually appear 5–28 days after sex. But symptoms can also appear months or even years later. They can pass the infection on to others even if they have no symptoms.

Only about half of women with trich have symptoms. They may have any or all of the following symptoms: yellow, green or gray vaginal discharge (often foamy)

with a strong odor and pain during sex or urinating. There may be irritation and itching. The irritation can make it easier to get another STD infection.

Most men have no symptoms. They may have clear or white discharge from the penis or sometimes burning with ejaculation or urination.

Testing for Trich

The doctor will use a swab to take fluid from the vagina or penis and look for the protozoa under a microscope. A better test is a culture but it takes longer and is more expensive. Trich can also be found in the cells taken for a Pap test, and male semen can be checked.

Treatment

The doctor will prescribe an antibiotic. Be sure to tell your doctor if you are pregnant, because some of the medicines should not be used by pregnant women. It's important not to have sex until you are finished with medicine. All partners should be treated also. If all partners are not treated at the same time, you can get trich again.

Sexually Related Conditions

There are some conditions that are not always spread through sexual contact but still affect the sexual organs, especially in women. In some cases it is not clear what causes the infection, but all of them can be treated.

DID YOU KNOW...?

BV is caused by an imbalance between the "good" and "bad" bacteria that normally live in the vagina.

Candidiasis (yeast infection, monilia)

Candidiasis is a common problem if the body grows too much yeast. Yeast is part of the normal balance in the vagina, penis and anal area. When the normal bacteria that keep yeast under control are out of balance, too many yeast cells grow. This is called overgrowth or more frequently a "yeast infection."

Yeast infections are not usually spread through sex. Antibiotic medicines can upset the normal balance in the vagina and cause yeast overgrowth. Hormone changes during pregnancy, use of birth control pills and menstruation can also cause yeast to grow.

It is not known if vaginal douches, perfumes, soaps, non-cotton or tight clothing affect the vaginal balance. Avoiding them can help decrease pain or discomfort during a yeast infection.

Signs and Symptoms

There is often a discharge that looks like cottage cheese. Itching, redness and burning are common, especially during urination. Sex may feel painful or dry. Males with candidiasis may experience an itchy rash on the penis.

Testing for Candidiasis

Usually the doctor can tell by examining the vagina, but the vaginal discharge can be tested. Because some STDs can look like a yeast infection, it is important to be tested for them at the same time.

Treatment

Getting the yeast and bacteria back into balance can be difficult. You should not buy yeast treatments from the drugstore without first having a check-up with your doctor. Some other problem may be causing the yeast infection and you should work together to find a treatment plan that is right for you. Other diseases are usually treated before the yeast overgrowth is treated. You might have to treat it more than once.

Treatment can be oral (pills) or a medicine that is placed in the vagina. **Some yeast creams are oil-based and can weaken condoms or diaphragms.**

Male partners of women with yeast infections are not usually treated but they should be checked for STDs.

Bacterial Vaginosis

("BV" or gardnerella)

BV is a very common vaginal infection. It is caused by an imbalance between the "good" and "bad" bacteria that normally live in the vagina. It is not clear how women get vaginosis, but it is unusual for a woman who has never had sex to get it. It can be caused by taking medicines like antibiotics that kill both good and bad bacteria.

There is a relationship between BV and low birth-weight babies. The bacteria that cause vaginosis are sometimes found in the uterus and tubes of women with pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), but it is not known if vaginosis is a cause of PID.

Signs and Symptoms

Women with vaginosis may have a vaginal discharge with an unpleasant odor. If there is discharge, it is usually white or gray. Some women report a strong fish-like odor, especially after sex. Women with BV may also have burning during urination or itching around the outside of the vagina, or both. Some women with BV report no signs or symptoms at all.

Testing for BV The doctor will look at the vagina for signs of BV and do tests on a sample of vaginal fluid to look for bacteria.

Treatment The doctor will prescribe an antibiotic. Although BV will sometimes clear up without treatment, all women with symptoms of BV should be treated to avoid problems, such as PID. Male partners generally do not need to be treated.

All pregnant women who have symptoms of BV should be checked and treated.

Important Reminders

- **Many STDs have no symptoms.**
- **Having one STD can make it easier to get another one.**
- **Many STDs can cause serious problems if they are not treated.**
- **It's easy and often free to get tested.**
- **Partners should be tested and treated also.**
- **Prevention is the best way to deal with STDs.**

If you have questions or need more information, contact your doctor, local health department or community clinic, or call the National STD Hotline at 1-800-227-8922.

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For persons with disabilities, this document is available on request in other formats. To submit a request, please call 1-800-525-0127 (TDD/TTY 1-800-833-6388).