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How to Prevent Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections that are spread by sexual contact. Except for colds and flu, STDs are the most common contagious (easily spread) diseases in the United States, with millions of new cases each year. Although some STDs can be treated and cured, others cannot. Prevention is the key to fighting STDs. By knowing the facts, you can take steps to protect your health.



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This pamphlet explains

- types and symptoms of STDs
- risks of getting an STD
- how to prevent STDs

About Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Anyone who has sexual contact—vaginal, anal, or oral sex—with another person may get an STD.

People with an STD may not have any symptoms

and may not know they have it. Even if there are no symptoms, your health can be affected.

STDs can cause severe damage to your body—even death. A person with an STD can pass it to others by contact with skin, genitals, mouth, rectum, or body fluids.

Symptoms of an STD can range from vaginal discharge and mild irritation to severe pain. Often, symptoms occur only if the disease becomes more advanced. In most cases, the long-term health problems can be avoided by early treatment.

STDs are caused by bacterial or viral infections. STDs caused by bacteria are treated with antibiotics. Those caused by viruses cannot be cured, but symptoms can be treated.

Anyone who is sexually active can be exposed to an STD. Even if there are no symptoms, tests can be done to diagnose infection.

Gonorrhea and Chlamydia

Gonorrhea and chlamydia are caused by bacteria. These two diseases often occur at the same time.

Gonorrhea and chlamydia often have no symptoms. When symptoms do occur, they may appear 2–21 days (3 weeks) after contact with an infected person. Symptoms may include:

- A discharge from a woman's vagina or a man's penis
- Painful or frequent urination
- Pain in the pelvis or abdomen
- Burning or itching in the vaginal area
- Redness or swelling of the vulva
- Bleeding between periods
- Sore throat with or without fever
- Swollen or enlarged lymph nodes

STDs and Pregnancy

Having an STD during pregnancy can harm the baby if it is passed to him or her.

- Gonorrhea and chlamydia both can cause health problems in the infant ranging from eye infections to pneumonia.
- Syphilis may cause miscarriage or stillbirth.
- **Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** infection can occur in a baby.

If you are pregnant and you or your partner have had—or may have—an STD, inform your doctor. Your baby may be at risk. Tests for some STDs are offered routinely during prenatal care. It is best to treat the STD early to lower the chances that your baby also will contract the disease. You and your partner both may have to be treated.

Gonorrhea and chlamydia can be treated at the same time with antibiotics. It is important to take all of your medicine. Your partner also must be treated.

You can pass gonorrhea and chlamydia to your partner even while you are being treated. If you have either disease, avoid sexual contact until both you and your partner have finished treatment.

Untreated chlamydia or gonorrhea can cause **pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)** in women. PID is an infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. It can cause **infertility**. Symptoms of PID are fever, nausea and vomiting, and pain in the abdomen. It can lead to long-term pelvic pain.

Human Papillomavirus

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common STDs in the United States. More than 100 types of this virus have been identified. Some types are spread from person to person through sexual contact.

Like many STDs, there often are no signs of genital HPV. However, a few types of HPV cause warts. For women, these warts can appear on the vulva, vagina, cervix, and anus. For men, they can appear on the penis, scrotum, anus, or anywhere else in the genital area.

Sometimes warts go away on their own. If they do not, there are several treatments for warts available. However, over-the-counter wart medications should never be used on genital warts.

Even after the warts have cleared up, the virus may be present. The virus can remain in the body for weeks or years without any symptoms.

Some types of HPV are linked to cancer in both women and men. In some women, certain types of HPV can cause abnormal changes in the cervix that may lead to cancer. HPV also is linked to cancer of the anus, vulva, vagina, penis, head, and neck.

Two vaccines are currently available that protect against some types of HPV. One vaccine protects against the two types of HPV that cause the most cases of cervical cancer. The other vaccine protects against the two types of HPV that cause the most cases of cervical cancer as well as the two types that cause the most cases of genital warts. They do not protect against other types of HPV. Therefore, you will still need to have regular screening for cervical cancer after getting the vaccine. The vaccines can be given to girls aged 9 years through 26 years. Both vaccines are given in three doses over a 6-month period.

Syphilis

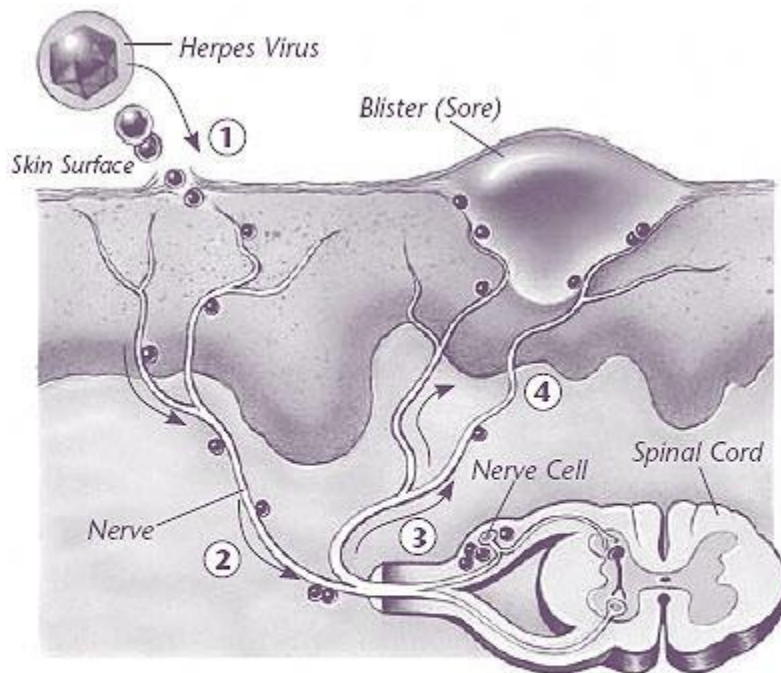
Syphilis is caused by a type of bacteria. If not treated, syphilis can infect many parts of the body, causing major health problems—even death.

Most people have no symptoms of syphilis. The first sign of syphilis may be a painless, smooth sore at the site of the infection. Syphilis is easily treated in this early stage. Other symptoms of syphilis are warts and a skin rash.

Syphilis is passed from person to person through direct contact with a syphilis sore. It also can be spread by touching the rash, warts, or infected blood during the second stage of infection. It enters the body through a sore or a cut in the skin or mucous membrane.

Sores often occur on the genitals or in the vagina, anus, or rectum. Sores also can occur on the lips and mouth.

Without treatment, the symptoms may go away, but the disease will remain. Years later, it can return in full force.



The herpes virus passes through your skin (1). It travels through your body (2) and settles at nerve cells near your spine (3). When something triggers a new bout of herpes, the virus leaves its resting place and travels along the nerve, back to the surface of the skin (4).

Genital Herpes

Millions of Americans carry the genital herpes virus. The most common symptom of herpes is a sore on or around the genitals. These sores appear as red spots, bumps, or blisters. They can last from a few days to a few weeks.

The symptoms go away by themselves, but the virus remains in your body. The sores may come back at any time, usually in the same place they first occurred. Treatment

can help heal the sores, but it cannot kill the virus. Therefore, once you have herpes, it is possible to transmit the infection to others without knowing it.

If you or your partner have oral or genital herpes, avoid sex from the time of first symptoms until a few days after the scabs have gone away. Not having sex does not mean you cannot hug or cuddle. Just be sure that lesions and their secretions do not touch the other person's skin. Wash your hands with soap and water after any possible contact with lesions. This will keep you from reinfecting yourself or passing the virus to someone else.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HIV is the virus that causes **acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)**. The rate of HIV infection is increasing most rapidly among women who have sex with men.

HIV enters the bloodstream by way of body fluids, usually blood or semen. Once in the blood, the virus invades and kills cells of the immune system—the body's natural defense against disease.

HIV weakens the immune system, which may lead to AIDS. With AIDS, a person's immune system is so weakened that other life-threatening conditions, such as infections or cancer, can occur. Although there is no cure for HIV, treatment may prevent or delay the onset of AIDS, which can be fatal.

Trichomonas

Trichomonas vaginitis is an infection caused by a microscopic parasite that is spread through sex. It can be cured with treatment. Many people have no symptoms of trichomonas. When symptoms do occur, they include discharge from the vagina and vaginal itching and redness.

Hepatitis

Hepatitis is a serious infection of the liver caused by a virus. Two types of hepatitis, B and C, can be sexually transmitted. They can be spread by direct contact with the body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and saliva) of an infected person. There is a vaccine available to prevent infection with hepatitis B. There is no vaccine to prevent hepatitis C infection.

Many people infected with hepatitis B or hepatitis C recover completely. However, some people develop chronic liver infections, which can lead to long-term health problems.

Are You at Risk?

You are at increased risk of getting an STD if

How to Protect Yourself from STDs

The factors listed in the [box](#) increase the risk of an STD. Adolescents have a higher risk, and lifestyle factors also can play a role. There are many ways you can reduce your risk of getting an STD:

- Know your sexual partners and limit their number—Your partner's sexual history is as important as your own. The more partners you or your partners have, the higher your risk of getting an STD.
- Use a latex or polyurethane condom—Using a latex or polyurethane condom every time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex decreases the chances of infection. Condoms lubricated with spermicides do not offer extra protection. Frequent use of some spermicides can increase the risk of HIV.
- Avoid risky sex practices—Sexual acts that tear or break the skin carry a higher risk of STDs. Even small cuts that do not bleed let germs pass back and forth. Anal sex poses a high risk because tissues in the rectum break easily. Body fluids also can carry STDs. Having any unprotected sexual contact with an infected person poses a high risk of getting an STD.
- Get immunized—Vaccinations are available that will help prevent hepatitis B and HPV.

you

- have or have had more than one sexual partner
- have a partner who has or has had more than one sexual partner
- have sex with someone who has an STD
- have a history of STDs
- use intravenous drugs (injected into a vein) or your partner uses intravenous drugs
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Finally...

Every woman should know how to protect herself and her partners from STDs. If you think you have an STD, seek medical treatment to avoid long-term health problems.

Glossary

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS): A disease with a group of signs and symptoms, usually of severe infections, occurring in a person whose immune system has been damaged by infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV): A virus that attacks certain cells of the body's immune system and causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Human Papillomavirus (HPV): A sexually transmitted virus that can cause small growths, called condylomas or genital warts, on or around the genitals.

Infertility: A condition in which a woman has been unable to become pregnant after 12 months without the use of any form of birth control.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID): An infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and nearby pelvic structures.

Trichomonas Vaginitis: A type of vaginal infection caused by a parasite that is passed through sex.

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