

STIs: Common Symptoms & Tips on Prevention

What are sexually transmitted infections?

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections you can get by having sex with someone who has an infection. These infections are usually passed by having vaginal intercourse, but they can also be passed through anal sex, oral sex or skin-to-skin contact. STIs can be caused by viruses or bacteria. STIs caused by viruses include hepatitis B, herpes, HIV and the human papilloma virus (HPV). STIs caused by bacteria include chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis.

Am I at risk for having an STI?

If you've ever had sex, you may be at risk for having an STI. Your risk is higher if you have had many sex partners, have had sex with someone who has had many partners or have had sex without using condoms. Some common symptoms of STIs are listed in the box below.

Common signs/symptoms of STIs

- Itching around the vagina and/or discharge from the vagina for women
- Discharge from the penis for men
- Pain during sex or when urinating
- Pain in the pelvic area
- Sore throats in people who have oral sex
- Pain in or around the anus for people who have anal sex
- Chancre sores (painless red sores) on the genital area, anus, tongue and/or throat
- A scaly rash on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet
- Dark urine, loose, light-colored stools, and yellow eyes and skin
- Small blisters that turn into scabs on the genital area
- Swollen glands, fever and body aches
- Unusual infections, unexplained fatigue, night sweats and weight loss
- Soft, flesh-colored warts around the genital area

Should I be checked for STIs?

See your doctor if you're at risk for having an STI, if you have any of the symptoms listed above, or if you have concerns about whether you have one. STIs can cause problems if left untreated.

For example, chlamydia can lead to problems that can cause women not to be able to have children. HPV can lead to cancer of the cervix or penis, and syphilis can lead to paralysis, mental problems, heart damage, blindness and death.

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How are STIs diagnosed?

Most STIs can be diagnosed through an exam by your doctor, a culture of the secretions from your vagina or penis, or through a blood test.

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Can STIs be prevented?

Yes. The only sure way to prevent STIs is by not having sex. If you have sex, you can lower your risk of getting an STI by only having sex with someone who isn't having sex with anyone else and who doesn't have an STI.

You should always use condoms when having sex, including oral and anal sex.

Do condoms prevent STIs?

Male latex condoms can reduce your risk of getting an STI if used correctly (see the box below). Be sure to use them every time you have sex. Female condoms aren't as effective as male condoms, but should be used when a man won't use a male condom.

Remember, though, that condoms aren't 100% safe and can't protect you from coming in contact with some sores, such as those that can occur with herpes, or warts, which can be caused by HPV infection.

What else should I do to prevent STIs?

Limit the number of sex partners you have. Ask your partner if he or she has, or has had, an STI and tell your partner if you have had one. Talk about whether you've both been tested for STIs and whether you should be tested.

Look for signs of an STI in your sex partner. But remember that STIs don't always cause symptoms. Don't have sex if you or your partner are being treated for an STI.

Wash your genitals with soap and water and urinate soon after you have sex. This may help clean away some germs before they have a chance to infect you.

Should I use a spermicide to help prevent STIs?

No. It was once thought that spermicides with nonoxynol-9 could help prevent STIs much like they help prevent pregnancy--by damaging the organisms that cause the diseases. New research has shown that nonoxynol-9 can irritate a woman's vagina and cervix, actually increasing the risk of STI infection.

Be sure to check the ingredients of any other sex-related products you own, such as lubricants and condoms. Some brands of these products may have nonoxynol-9 added to them. If you are unsure if your spermicide or any other product contains nonoxynol-9, ask your doctor before using it.