

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are a risk for anyone who is sexually active. They range from uncomfortable infections to life-threatening diseases like AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). Many people with STDs don't even know it, making it easy to pass the disease on to their partners during sex. If you're sexually active, it's important to know about STDs and how to reduce your risk of getting them.

What are STDs?

STDs are a group of diseases with one thing in common: they are passed from one partner to another during sex. Anyone who is sexually active is at risk of getting an STD. However, STD rates are much higher for people who engage in certain high-risk behaviors, especially having a lot of sexual partners and not using a condom every time they have sex.

Fluid draining from the vagina or penis, pain when urinating, and sores on or around the genitals (vagina or penis) are often the first signs of an STD. However, many people have STDs without any symptoms. This includes people with dangerous infections like HIV (human immunodeficiency virus), the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). Other STDs can cause lifelong medical problems, including infertility.

All STDs are preventable. Most, such as gonorrhea and syphilis, can be cured with medication. Others, like HIV/AIDS and genital herpes, cannot be cured but can still be treated and improved. If you have any questions or concerns about STDs, make sure to talk to your doctor.

What do they look like?

The symptoms of STDs vary a lot. Sometimes there are no symptoms at all. Other times, symptoms take a while to develop. During that time, you can still pass the disease on to your partner.

The main symptoms of STDs are:

- Fluid draining (discharge) from the vagina or penis. Females may notice an abnormal smell coming from the vagina.
- Pain when urinating. Although this can be a symptom of urinary tract infection, in teens it is often a sign of STDs.
- Males may notice swelling and pain in the area of the testicles or scrotum (*epididymitis*).

- Females may have itching or pain of the vagina or surrounding area (*vaginitis*).
- In both males and females, sores may develop on and around the genitals, including:
 - Ulcers (open sores) or blisters, which may be a sign of herpes simplex.
 - Warts (genital warts).
 - Tiny parasites (lice or “crabs”).
- In females, additional symptoms such as fever and abdominal pain can be signs of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). (See under “What are some possible complications of STDs?”)

What causes STDs?

Bacteria. Several types of bacteria and other germs may cause infections in and around the genitals. More than one type of infection may be present at the same time. Some of these diseases are:

- Gonorrhea (produced by *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*), which can cause vaginal discharge, PID, and sometimes infection elsewhere in the body.
- Syphilis (caused by the spirochete *Treponema pallidum*), which is a highly contagious disease that can cause many complications if untreated.
- Infection with *Chlamydia*, which can cause vaginal discharge, PID, and other complications.

Viruses. Different viruses cause different diseases.

- Herpes simplex virus type 2. This virus causes outbreaks of painful genital sores. Herpes simplex type 1 usually causes cold sores of the mouth, but can also cause genital herpes.)
- HIV, which causes the life-threatening disease AIDS.
- *Hepatitis B virus*, which causes liver disease. This virus can be passed on both sexually and in contaminated blood.
- Human papillomaviruses (HPV), which cause warts on the genitals. In females, papillomavirus of the cervix (the opening of the uterus) may increase the long-term risk of cervical cancer.

Parasites.

- Lice (“crabs”) may infest the area around the genitals, especially the pubic hair.
- *Trichomonas* causes vaginitis (with vaginal discharge) in females.

What are some possible complications of STDs?

- In females, bacterial infections like gonorrhea and chlamydial infections may cause a more serious infection deeper inside the reproductive system, including in the uterus (womb), ovaries, and ovarian tubes. This is called pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), and it may lead to an increased risk of infertility. Teenage girls are at highest risk of PID.
- Herpes simplex virus type 2 causes a lifelong infection, which may recur for a number of years. A pregnant woman with this type of herpes may pass the infection on to her baby.
- Hepatitis B virus can lead to liver disease. The virus may also be passed on from a pregnant woman to her infant.
- HIV can result in AIDS and destroys the immune system.
- Herpes, hepatitis B, and HIV can all be passed on from a pregnant woman to her infant. Other STDs can also cause serious complications in newborns.
- HPV can lead to cervical cancer.

What puts you at risk of STDs?

All sexually active people are at risk of STDs. The main risk factors are:

- Having a lot of sexual partners.
- Not using a condom every time you have sex.
- Having sex with gay or bisexual males.
- Using injected (IV) drugs.

Teens who start having sex at younger ages and those who use drugs or alcohol also seem to be at higher risk for STDs.

Can STDs be prevented?

- *Not having sex* is the best way to prevent STDs. There are many other ways to show affection and love for another person besides having sex. Never let anyone pressure you into having sex if you don't want to.
- *Limit partners.* The more sexual partners you have, the higher your risk of STDs.
- *Use condoms.* Using a condom every time you have sex reduces your risk of STDs, including HIV infection.
- *Know and talk to your partners.* Don't be shy about asking your partners whether they have any STDs. Remember that a person can look perfectly healthy and still have an STD.

How are STDs treated?

If you are diagnosed with an STD, it is essential to tell your partner(s). They will need medical examination and possible treatment too.

Treatment for STDs varies:

- Many STDs can be cured with antibiotics. These include gonorrhea, syphilis, and infections with *Chlamydia* and *Trichomonas*.
- Antibiotics may be given in a shot or pills. Make sure you finish your prescription completely; don't stop taking the medication just because your symptoms improve.
- *Pubic lice* can be eliminated with medications applied to the affected area.
- *Genital warts* can be treated with topical medications or frozen with liquid nitrogen. However, there is a risk that the warts will return after treatment.
- *Herpes* can be treated with antiviral medications, such as acyclovir. Your doctor can prescribe treatment when outbreaks occur and may recommend regular treatment to reduce the number of outbreaks.
 - To reduce the risk of spreading herpes infection, avoid having sex during outbreaks. However, it is sometimes difficult to tell because the virus can be present without sores.
 - Herpes infection is present for life, but symptoms become less common with time.
 - If you have herpes infection and become pregnant, there is a risk of infection for the infant. Be sure to mention this to your doctor. 
- *PID* can be a serious infection, requiring more intensive treatment. This may include going to the hospital for intravenous (IV) antibiotics.
- *Hepatitis B virus* infection may resolve on its own. If not, treatment options are available.
- *HIV infection* is a lifelong problem. New treatments may reduce your risk of developing AIDS.

When should I call your office?

Call our office anytime you have questions or concerns regarding STDs, including how to prevent them.

During treatment for an STD, call our office if symptoms (for example, pain or fluid draining from the genitals) don't improve or if new symptoms develop.