

What You Should Know About ...

See Glossary section for definitions of underlined words.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

What is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI)?

- A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection which is passed from one person to another through sexual contact – vaginal, oral or anal sex.
- Some STIs are spread when infected body fluids such as blood, semen or vaginal fluid enter into the bloodstream during sex.
- Some STIs are spread by touching an infected area of skin.
- Some STIs can be spread to others by sharing needles/syringes/pipes when taking drugs, or by sharing sex toys.
- Some STIs can be passed from an infected woman to her baby during pregnancy and childbirth.
- A person can have more than one STI at the same time.

Can STIs be cured?

There are many kinds of sexually transmitted infections. STIs are caused by bacteria, parasites or viruses. There are no vaccinations to prevent most STIs, however there is a vaccine for Hepatitis A & B, and there is also a vaccine for some strains of HPV.

Some STIs can be cured with antibiotics or special lotions.

Examples of curable STIs are:

- Chlamydia
- LGV (lymphogranuloma venereum)
- Syphilis
- Gonorrhea
- Pubic Lice
- Trichomoniasis (trich)

Viral infections are not curable. However, there are medications which can be taken to slow the progress of some viral STIs or help lessen pain or discomfort.

Examples of viral STIs are:

- Human Papiloma Virus (HPV or Genital Warts)
 - there is a vaccine to prevent some strains of this STI
- Herpes
- HIV
- Hepatitis C
- Hepatitis A and B (a vaccine is available to prevent these)

How do I know if I have an STI?

You may have an STI and have **no symptoms**, or you may have obvious symptoms. It can be difficult to know if you have an STI because you may or may not see any signs. It is important for you to be aware of changes in your body and health.

Some symptoms of an STI could be:

- Different, or heavier, or foul smelling discharge from your vagina
- Discharge from your penis
- Burning or bleeding during urination (peeing)
- Not able to urinate at all (feeling a need to urinate but only ending up with a trickle)
- Irregular periods
- Rash, lumps, sores or blisters in your genital or anal area (around your vagina, penis or anus)
- Irritation (redness) and itching around your genitals (penis or vagina) or anus
- Swelling around your vagina or penis or testicles
- Pelvic pain

You may have only one symptom at a time or several together, or none at all.

Having any of these symptoms does not necessarily mean that you have an STI. If you are sexually active, see a health care provider for a medical exam and ask to be tested for STIs.

What can I do to prevent getting an STI?

- **Abstinence**

The only sure way to prevent getting most STIs is: Do not have vaginal, oral or anal sex that involves contact with bodily fluids (blood, semen or vaginal secretions). Herpes and HPV are spread by skin-to-skin contact. Sharing affection by hugging, kissing, touching and massage are safer ways to be intimate with your partner.

- **Only one sexual partner**

If you and your partner have been tested and both are not infected with an STI, you must both agree to have sex ONLY with each other.

- **Use condoms**

If you have vaginal or anal intercourse, use a lubricated latex male condom or a female condom every time to protect against STIs.

If you have oral sex, using condoms or an oral dam (square of latex) decreases the risk of getting an STI for both partners, regardless of who is giving or receiving. A non-lubricated condom on the penis or an oral dam against the anus or the vulva (woman's genitals) prevents contact with body fluids. If you do not have an oral dam, make one from a non-lubricated condom (you can use a lubricated condom). Cut the condom from the rim to the centre of the reservoir tip, and unroll it. Spread it open with both hands and place it over the area of contact.

- **Never share needles and syringes, or sex toys**

If you get a tattoo or piercing, be sure that you go to a licensed shop.

- **Don't get drunk or high on drugs**

Using alcohol or drugs can make it difficult to use a condom or dam. It can also slow down sexual response so that sex doesn't feel as good, or a guy can't keep an erection (hard penis). Or, you could end up having sex with someone you wouldn't normally have chosen to be with.

- **Talk to your partner(s)**

Prevention is important. Talk to your partner about using condoms. Keep some condoms with you, and also where you usually have sex. It is your responsibility to protect yourself and your partner from becoming infected.

- **Get tested and have regular check-ups**

If you are having sex, even if you have no symptoms of an STI, have a medical check up at least once a year. Ask the health care provider for STI testing to make sure you do not have an infection.

How can I be tested for an STI?

- There are different types of tests for STIs. Testing may include a visual inspection of the genitals (penis or vagina) and skin, a blood sample, a urine sample, and a swab sample taken from sores or genitals (penis or vagina) to test the discharge.
- If you test positive for an STI, the health care provider may ask you about previous sexual contacts so that those people can receive treatment as well.
- All information is confidential and private.
- You do not need a partner's or parent's permission to get free, confidential STI testing.

Where can I get more information?

- From your health care provider, community health clinic, or public health nurse.
- From the Facts of Life On-Line: e-mail your questions to thefactsoflife@serc.mb.ca.
- From the AIDS/STI InfoLine: 945-2437 in Winnipeg or 1-800-782-2437 in the rest of Manitoba

Glossary:

anal sex – a man's penis is put into the anus of another person

oral sex – the mouth is touching another person's penis, vagina or anus.

vaginal sex – a man's penis is put into a woman's vagina

visual inspection – look at