

For Men: What do I need to know about taking care of my sexual health?

What is sexual health?

We are all sexual beings, from the moment we're born until we die. Our sexuality is part of our personality and who we are. It includes our beliefs, attitudes, feelings, and actions.

Sexual health involves being able to enjoy the positive aspects of sexual behaviour and to make informed choices that fit with personal values. Sexual health also includes physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being – freedom from fear, shame, guilt and diseases. Gender, age, social class, ethno-cultural background, sexual orientation, ability, and personal beliefs all affect our sexual decisions and experiences.

Taking care of your sexual health is an important part of maintaining your health, in general. To ensure that you are sexually healthy, you need to have access to confidential, non-judgmental sexual and reproductive health information and services to help you make informed sexual decisions throughout your life.

How do I choose a birth control method?

It is important for men who do not wish to get a female partner pregnant to know about available birth control options, emergency contraception, and protection against sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Choosing to not have sex, engaging in sexual activity that doesn't involve the penis penetrating the vagina, using condoms, and having a vasectomy are the only birth control options that are currently available for men. Research is being done to develop other male methods of birth control, including pills and injections. There are many ways that men can be involved in birth control with their partner, including discussing birth control decisions with her, sharing the cost of the method, and inserting barrier methods. Wearing condoms is an effective way of reducing the risk of both pregnancy and STIs.

To use any birth control method effectively, both partners should have a clear understanding of how to use the method properly. For more information about birth control options, talk to a birth control counsellor, a doctor, or a nurse. You can also check out one of the websites listed on the Suggested Resources page of this package.

How can I protect myself from sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV?

The best way to protect yourself from an STI if you are sexually active is to practise safer sex every time and all the time. There are many sexual activity choices including masturbation, massage, intercourse, and oral sex. The risk of contracting an STI depends on the sexual behaviour. People can also choose not to have sexual contact at all as a way of protecting themselves from infections. Two basic rules for safer sex are to avoid exchanging potentially infectious body fluids (including semen, blood, pre-ejaculatory fluid, and vaginal fluids) and to avoid having sex if a partner has a sore on her or his body.

You can also reduce your risk of acquiring some STIs (such as genital warts) by reducing the number of sexual partners you have. However, it is possible to get an STI whether you have multiple partners or one partner if you are not practising safer sex with your partner(s). Be sure to discuss with your partner whether or not your relationship is monogamous – meaning that you and your partner have sex only with each other. Don't assume you are in a monogamous relationship.

NOTE: STIs can be transmitted through unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse, oral sex and when sharing sex toys.

How can I tell if I have a sexually transmitted infection (STI)?

Sometimes there are noticeable signs or symptoms that you have been infected with an STI. However, it is possible that the symptoms are so mild that you don't even notice them or that there are no symptoms. Sometimes people notice symptoms but assume everything's OK when the symptoms go away in a day or two.

If you are sexually active and notice any of the following signs or symptoms, see your doctor or go to a walk-in clinic:

- Discharge from your penis
- Burning when you urinate (pee)
- Blood in urine
- Feeling the need to urinate but not being able to
- Sores or blisters around the penis, testicles or anal area
- Irritation and itching around the penis, testicles or anus
- A rash in the genital area
- Pain in the lower abdomen

Symptoms of an STI don't always show up in the parts of your body that you would expect them to. "Rashes or bumps anywhere on the body, that may or may not itch or be painful, can also be symptoms of an STI."

www.actoronto.org/home.nsf/pages/sti

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

Should I get tested for sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

An important part of sexual health for men is getting tested for STIs on a regular basis.

Many people feel embarrassed about the idea of asking for an STI test, so you are not alone if that's how you feel.

Most people grow up with the message that sex is not something we talk about – not seriously, anyway. It's OK to have sex and to make jokes about sex, but it's just too embarrassing to talk about sexual behaviour with a partner or a health professional. As well, there are many myths about the type of people that become infected with sexually transmitted infections. If we believe that only “dirty” people or “sluts” (male or female) get STIs that usually means we don't see ourselves as being at risk. The truth is, STIs are the result of becoming infected with a virus or bacteria that really doesn't care much about WHO you are. If two people have unprotected sex (whatever activities that might include) and one of them is infected with an STI, the chances are good that their partner will become infected, as well.

If you've had sex without a condom, take the time to go for an STI test. This can be part of your yearly physical check-up or more frequently (like every 6 months) if you change sexual partners often or have more than one sexual partner. Don't assume an STI test is part of an annual check-up. Some doctors will automatically discuss the need for STI testing with you; others will expect you to ask for an STI test if you think you need one.

There are three parts to STI testing for men:

- First, a visual check is done for any lumps, bumps, sores, etc. You should be familiar with the way your penis, testicles and genital area usually look so that you can report any changes to your doctor or health care professional.
- The second part of an STI test is a testicular check. The doctor or health care provider palpates (feels gently) the testicles to check for lumps or any soreness. This is also a chance to check for testicular cancer. All men should learn how to do self-examinations on a regular basis, too.
- The third and final part of an STI test is the urethral swab, urine test or blood test.
 - Urethral swab: A small cotton swab (like a miniature q-tip) is inserted a few centimetres into the penis through the urethral opening (pee hole) to gather a sample that will be analyzed in a medical lab. Although the procedure may be uncomfortable, it is done quickly. It helps to remember to breathe and relax.
 - Urine test: Some clinics and medical offices now offer urine tests that are more convenient than being swabbed. So, if you are really uncomfortable with the swab, you can still be responsible and get tested.
 - Blood test: Some STIs, like syphilis, Hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS, are diagnosed by a blood test.

Remember, if you are sexually active, regular testing for sexually transmitted infections is important. An undiagnosed STI can cause serious health problems. You may not be thinking about it now, but an undiagnosed STI can cause fertility problems (you won't be able to have children) many years from now.

Is there anything else I can do to reduce the risk of contracting an STI?

There are certain factors that can elevate your chances of getting an infection, these include:

Having sex at an early age: Typically adolescents see themselves as invincible and as such don't give much thought to things like protection or getting tested. Starting sexual activity at an early age often results in more sexual partners.

Currently having an STI: If your body is fighting an infection, your body is more susceptible to infection from other viruses.

Using alcohol or drugs: Both drugs and alcohol can compromise your judgement and lead to risky sexual behavior or situations.

Injection drugs: Sharing needles can lead to serious, life threatening infections.

Being young: Most new cases of STIs occur between people the age of 15 and 24 years.

Having sex with men: This goes for both women and men.

Having anonymous, casual sex: Random encounters encourage the spreading of STIs across a network of several groups of people

Male Sexual Health: It's your plumbing...take good care of it!

<http://www.mayoclinic.com>

<http://www.plannedparenthood.org/health-topics/birth-control-4211.htm>