

Wellness

Sexually Transmissible Infections (STIs)

Keep yourself safe from STIs

You've probably heard you can catch diseases, including infections, through sex. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are common, and there are many different types. So it's important to know how to protect yourself and stay healthy.

What are STIs?

Most STIs are caused by bacteria or viruses that are passed from one person to another during unprotected sex. This includes sexual intercourse, genital contact, sharing sex toys, oral and anal sex.

Protect yourself from STIs

Sometimes STIs don't have any symptoms, so it's important to practice safe sex. Use barrier protection, such as condoms or dental dams. You can buy these from pharmacies in Australia. 'The pill' to prevent pregnancy does not protect you against STIs.

It's also important to get tested regularly for STIs if you're having sex. Most STI tests are simple. They might involve testing your saliva, urine, or blood. Many sexual health clinics will do these tests for free, even if you don't have a Medicare card.

If you have symptoms - seek help

It's worth seeking help early, even though you might be a bit embarrassed. It will help you get the best treatment possible. STI symptoms may include any of these:

- an unusual discharge from your vagina, penis or anus
- bleeding after sex that's not from menstrual periods
- pain and swelling in the testicles
- sores, blisters, warts, rashes, irritation or itching near your genitals or anus

- pain on passing urine, or needing to pass urine more often than usual
- pain during sex
- pelvic or lower abdominal (tummy) pain
- sore throat, swollen glands, fever and body aches.

You don't need a referral from a doctor to go to a sexual health clinic in Australia - you can make your own appointment. All visits are confidential, and you don't have to give your real name. You can find more information on the Family Planning Alliance Australia website.

You can also go to your student health clinic and talk to a doctor, or visit a youth health centre. These options are often free, so choose whichever option you feel more comfortable with.

Common STIs - why it's important to protect yourself

Chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis

These are all infections caused by bacteria, and can be serious if left untreated. For example, they could leave you with fertility problems (difficulty having children). The good news is that you can treat all these infections with antibiotics.

HIV

HIV is a virus that can eventually become a serious condition called AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Some medications help to slow down the disease but there is still

no cure. There is also a chance to prevent the infection if you treat it within 72 hours of infection. Go to your hospital emergency department straight away or ring the post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) hotline number in your state for advice.

Genital herpes and genital warts

These are infections caused by different viruses from the herpes family. They are spread through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity. You may get painful blisters or warts around the genital area. But some people don't experience any symptoms. There is no cure for these infections. You may have them for life or your immune system may eventually clear them. Flare-ups of the blisters or warts can be treated.

Genital warts and cancer

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is a type of virus that causes genital wart. If it infects you, it can cause cancer of the cervix, and genital cancers. Vaccines can protect you against the main cancer-causing HPV virus types. You get the best protection if you are vaccinated before you become sexually active. If you have a cervix, regular cervical screening is a must to detect cervical cancer early, regardless of whether you've been vaccinated or not. This is because the HPV vaccine only provides protection from some cancer-causing HPV strains.

Let them know

If you have an STI, it's important let your previous sexual partners know to prevent them from spreading the infection to others. Sexual health clinics can let them know anonymously if you're uncomfortable doing this. You can also do it yourself anonymously using the 'Let Them Know' website. Your current sexual partner will need to be treated too, for their own health and to prevent re-infecting you.



Let Them Know

www.letthemknow.org.au

Sources:

Australian Government Department of Health. National Immunisation Program [Online, accessed Jan 2022] Available from: www.immunise.health.gov.au

Healthdirect. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) [Online, accessed April 2017] Available from: www.health.gov.au

State Department of Victoria. Better Health Channel. Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) [Online, last updated July 2022, accessed Jan 2022] Available from: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

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Further Information



Family Planning Alliance Australia

familyplanningallianceaustralia.org.au



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