

HIV/AIDS can be transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal fluids and can be passed on through unprotected sexual activity, sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, and the use of non-sterilised tattooing and body piercing equipment.

Hepatitis

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. Hepatitis A, B and C are the three major viruses that cause hepatitis. There is no cure for hepatitis, but vaccines are available for hepatitis A and B.

Many people with hepatitis have no symptoms, but some experience yellowing of the skin and eyes, loss of appetite, nausea, stomach pain, extreme tiredness and pains in their joints.

Hepatitis A is transmitted through contact with faeces (poo) from contaminated water or food, or by anal sex or oral-anal contact.

Hepatitis B is transmitted through blood, semen and vaginal fluids and can be passed on through unprotected sexual activity, sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, and use of non-sterilised tattooing and body piercing equipment and sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes.

Hepatitis C is transmitted through contact with infected blood and can be passed on through sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, use of non-sterilised tattoo and body piercing equipment and sharing personal items such as razors and toothbrushes. It is not often sexually transmitted but there is still a risk involved, particularly if a woman has her period or if the skin is broken.

What do I do now?

If you think you have an STI or if you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA. Don't wait and hope the symptoms will disappear – even if signs of an STI go away, the infection can remain in your body and cause health problems later on.

Fact - you can get the same STI more than once

Many people feel embarrassed if they get an STI, but don't let this stop you from seeking treatment. Doctors treat STIs all the time and any information about you is kept confidential.

Finding out you have an STI can feel isolating, but remember you're not the only one out there and it isn't the end of your sex life - you just need to take precautions. Talking to a friend or counsellor can often help.

If you have any questions about STIs you can ring the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6178 (1800 198 205 country callers).

Take responsibility and look after your own sexual health – don't rely on someone else to do it for you. Be confident about the decisions you make and enjoy yourself.



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The Ins and Outs of



STIs



What is an STI?

A sexually transmissible infection (STI) is an infection that can be passed on through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Most STIs are transmitted through an exchange of body fluids, but some can be passed on through skin to skin genital contact.

STIs can cause a wide range of health problems, from mild irritation to serious illness. Some STIs are easily cured with antibiotics if detected early, but can have long-term consequences if left untreated. While other STIs can't be cured, treatments are available to ease symptoms.

Many people with an STI have no symptoms, but some people do. Signs of an STI can include:

- unusual discharge from the penis, vagina or anus
- itchiness around the genital area
- a burning sensation when peeing
- a rash, sores or small lumps on or around the penis, vagina or anus
- unusual bleeding from the vagina eg after sex or between periods
- pain and swelling in the testicles

If you notice any of these symptoms, or if you've had unprotected sex in the past, get tested by a doctor or at FPWA. Consider discussing your symptoms with any sexual partners. Testing for STIs is quick and painless - it only takes a few minutes and usually involves a urine sample.

Sometimes symptoms go away by themselves, but this doesn't mean the infection has gone.

Fact - many STIs have no symptoms, so it's possible to have one and not know it

Protect yourself

Condoms and dams help reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex). They stop body fluids like semen, blood and vaginal fluids from being exchanged. As some STIs can be passed on through skin to skin contact, it's important to remember that condoms and dams only protect the area of skin they cover.

Use water-based lubricants with condoms, as oil-based lubricants like Vaseline and massage oil weaken condoms and increase the risk of breakage. Use a new condom or dam every time you have sex and check the expiry date before use.

If you think there is a chance you might have sex, be prepared and have some protection handy. Many people think they are in an exclusive relationship, but this isn't always the case. As things can change in a relationship without you knowing, the best way to protect yourself is to use a condom and/or dam every time you have sex.

Fact - condoms are the only form of protection that reduce the risk of getting or passing on an STI as well as helping prevent pregnancy

Emergency contraception (EC) can be used to prevent pregnancy (but not STIs) if you've had unprotected sex or if the condom breaks or comes off. It is most effective when taken within 24 hours of having sex. There is some effectiveness for up to 120 hours (5 days) afterwards, however effectiveness decreases as time passes. EC is available over the counter at pharmacies, so you don't need to see a doctor to get a prescription.

Decisions about sex

Making decisions about sex can be difficult. Deciding what's right for you is up to you. This includes deciding when and who to have sex with, and how to go about doing it safely, or maybe deciding not to have sex at all.

Fact - no one has the right to force or pressure you into having sex

It's important to take your time when it comes to making decisions about relationships and sex so you don't make a decision you might regret later on.

If you do decide to have sex, try and talk about safe sex early on, before the heat of the moment. Even though this may be difficult, sex will be a lot more enjoyable if you aren't worrying about STIs or pregnancy.

Drugs and alcohol

Alcohol and other drugs affect people's ability to make safe decisions. If you take drugs or drink alcohol know your own limits so you can make the same safe decisions that you would if you were sober. Sharing equipment such as needles, spoons and tourniquets can put you at risk of HIV and hepatitis.

Fact - taking advantage of someone if they are under the influence of drugs or alcohol is a crime

Common STIs

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea

Chlamydia and gonorrhoea are transmitted through an exchange of body fluids (semen, blood and vaginal fluids) during unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sexual activity. They can infect the urethra, cervix (entrance to the womb) and anus in females, and the penis, anus, testicles and vas deferens (epididymitis) in males. They can also infect the throat.

Often people with chlamydia or gonorrhoea have no symptoms and don't know they have an infection. Symptoms, when present, can include a burning sensation when peeing or an unusual discharge from the penis or vagina. Both can be cured with antibiotics. If left untreated chlamydia and gonorrhoea can lead to infertility in men and women (when you can't have children).

Fact - chlamydia is the most common STI among young people in Australia

Genital Herpes

Herpes can infect the mouth or genital area. While many people with genital herpes experience no symptoms, the first sign of an infection is often an itching or tingling sensation in the genital area, followed by tiny blisters appearing. People with an infection may also have flu-like symptoms like fever, headaches and muscle aches and pains. Herpes is passed on through skin to skin contact with a person who has the virus - this can occur through oral, vaginal or anal sex or other intimate contact. There is currently no cure for herpes, but effective treatments are available.

Genital Warts

Warts are small cauliflower-shaped or flat lumps that lie on the skin. Genital warts can be found on the vagina, vulva (vaginal lips), cervix (opening to the womb) or anus in women or on the penis, anus or testicles in men. Sometimes genital warts are so small that they can't be seen or felt, so it is possible to have them and not know it. Genital warts are sometimes detected when a girl has a Pap smear.

Genital warts are caused by a virus called the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), which is usually passed on during sexual activity through skin to skin contact or body fluids. If the virus infects the cervix there is a chance of cervical cancer developing. A free cervical cancer vaccine is available for young women - talk to a doctor or FPWA clinician for more details. There is no treatment to cure HPV, and the body usually gets rid of the virus by itself over time.

Other STIs

Syphilis

The first sign of syphilis is a painless sore that usually appears on or near the genital area or mouth soon after infection. This generally heals within 2-3 weeks but if left untreated, the infection moves into its secondary stage. Symptoms at this time can include a rash (especially on the hands and feet), swollen glands and hair loss.

Syphilis is transmitted through unprotected vaginal, anal and oral sex, or direct contact with open sores. In its early stages syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. If left untreated for many years it can cause serious damage to body organs and sometimes be fatal.

Fact - blood-borne viruses are passed on through blood to blood contact. HIV and hepatitis B and C are all blood-borne viruses

HIV/AIDS

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus which attacks the body's immune system and can lead to the later stage of infection known as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). Early HIV symptoms include a flu-like illness, similar to glandular fever, with swollen glands in the neck, armpits and groin, and headaches, fever and a rash.