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Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections that are spread by sexual contact. Except for colds and flu, STDs are the most common contagious diseases in the United States, with about 12 million new cases of STDs each year. Some STDs can be cured. Others cannot.

Prevention is the key to fighting STDs. By knowing the facts, you can take steps to protect your health. This pamphlet will tell you more about:

- The symptoms of STDs
- The types of STDs
- The risks of getting an STD
- How you can prevent STDs

About STDs

Everyone who has sex with another person can get an STD. People with an STD may not know they have it. Often there are no symptoms. But that does not mean that it is not affecting your health.

STDs can cause severe damage to your body—even death. Even if there are no symptoms, a person with an STD can pass it to others by contact with skin, genitals, mouth, rectum, or body fluids.

Symptoms of an STD can range from mild irritation to severe pain. Often, symptoms occur only as the disease becomes more advanced. In most cases, the long-term health problems can be avoided by early treatment.

STDs are caused by being infected with tiny living organisms called bacteria or viruses. Those caused by bacteria are treated with antibiotics. Infections caused by viruses often cannot be cured, but symptoms can be treated.

If you suspect you may have been exposed to an STD, ask your doctor for advice. Even if there are no symptoms, a doctor can diagnose an STD. Tests can be done to detect infection. Anyone who is sexually active should know about these STDs and how to protect against them.

How to Use a Condom

Proper condom use helps protect you and your partner against STDs as well as pregnancy. A condom should be used any time you have sex with a man.

Only water-based lubricants can be used safely with a condom. It is unsafe to use oils or lotions, such as olive oil or cold cream.



The most common type of condom fits over the penis. There also is a female condom that fits over the cervix. Because the female condom is new, not much is known about how well it prevents STDs, but it may provide protection similar to that of the male condom.

To use the male condom, place the rolled-up condom over the tip of the erect penis. Hold the end of the condom to allow a little extra space at the tip. Then unroll the condom over the penis.

Right after ejaculation, grasp the condom around the base of the penis as it is withdrawn. Throw the condom away. It should never be reused.



To use the female condom, squeeze the inner ring between your fingers and insert it into the vagina as far as possible. Push the inner ring up until it is just behind the pubic bone. About an inch of the open end should be outside your body.

Right after ejaculation, squeeze and twist the outer ring and pull the pouch out gently. Throw the condom away. It should never be reused.

Gonorrhea and Chlamydia

Gonorrhea and **chlamydia** are caused by bacteria. Each year, about 800,000 people in the U.S. are infected with gonorrhea. About 4 million get chlamydia. These two diseases often occur at the same time.

Many women and men with gonorrhea and chlamydia have few or no symptoms. If symptoms do appear, however, they may appear from 2 days to 3 weeks after contact with an infected person. Symptoms may include:

- A discharge from a woman's vagina or a man's penis
- Painful or frequent urination
- Pain in the pelvis or abdomen
- Burning or itching in the vaginal area
- Redness or swelling of the vulva
- Pain in the joints
- Sore throat

If not treated, both chlamydia and gonorrhea can cause **pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)** in women. PID is an infection of the uterus, fallopian tubes, and ovaries. It is the most common preventable cause of **infertility** in the United States. Symptoms of PID are fever, nausea and vomiting, and pain in the abdomen. PID can lead to long-term pelvic pain.

Human Papillomavirus

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a virus that can cause genital warts. It is one of the most common STDs in the United States.

A person can be infected with HPV but have no warts. The virus can remain in the body for weeks or years without showing any symptoms.

Sometimes warts go away on their own. Several treatments for warts are available. But, even after the warts have cleared up, the virus may be present.

The HPV virus has been linked to some types of cancer, including those of the cervix and vulva. Regular Pap tests can help detect early signs of cervical cancer.

Syphilis

Syphilis is caused by a type of bacteria called a spirochete. If not treated, syphilis can infect many parts of the body, causing major health problems—even death.

Most people have no symptoms of syphilis. The first sign of syphilis may be a painless, smooth sore at the site of the infection. Syphilis is easily treated in this early stage.

Without treatment, the symptoms may go away, but the disease will remain. Years later, it can return in full force.

Genital Herpes

Genital herpes may be the most common STD of all. As many as 30 million Americans may now carry the herpes virus.

STDs and Pregnancy

Having an STD during pregnancy can harm the baby if it is passed to him or her.

- Gonorrhea and chlamydia both can cause health problems in the infant ranging from eye infections to pneumonia.
- Syphilis may cause miscarriage or stillbirth.
- HIV infection can occur in a baby.

If you are pregnant and you or your partner have had—or may have—an STD, inform your doctor. Your baby may be at risk. It is best to treat the STD early to lower the chances that your baby also will contract the disease. The most common symptom of herpes is sores on or around the genitals. These appear as red spots, bumps, or blisters. They last from a few days to a few weeks.

The symptoms go away by themselves, but the virus remains in your body. The sores may come back at any time, usually in the same place they first occurred. Treatment can help heal the sores, but it cannot kill the virus.

HIV Infection

The **human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** is a virus that causes **acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS)**. The rate of HIV infection is rising most rapidly among women who have sex with men.

HIV enters the bloodstream by way of body fluids, usually blood or semen. Once in the blood, the virus invades and kills cells of the immune system—the body's natural defense against disease.

HIV weakens the immune system, leading to AIDS. With AIDS, a person's immune system is so weak that it can no longer fight off infections.

Treatment may decrease your risk of getting AIDS. The disease is most often fatal.

Trichomonas

Trichomonas is a microscopic parasite that is spread through sex. Women who have **trichomonas vaginitis** are at a higher risk of infection with other STDs. It can be cured.

Hepatitis B

Hepatitis B is a serious infection of the liver caused by the **hepatitis B virus**. The disease can be fatal. It is spread by direct contact with the body fluids (blood, semen, vaginal fluids) of an infected person. There is no cure.

How to Protect Yourself from STDs

The factors listed in the box increase the risk of an STD. If any apply to you, protect yourself.

The only sure way to prevent getting an STD is not to have sex. If you do have sex, you can reduce your risk:

- Know and limit your sexual partners—Your partner's sexual history is as important as your own. The more partners you or your partners have, the higher your risk of getting an STD.
- Use a condom—Using a condom every time you have sex lowers the chances of infection.
- Use a spermicide—Most birth control creams, jellies, and foams contain a chemical called nonoxynol 9 that may help guard against some STDs. Used with a condom, they may offer some protection.
- Avoid risky sex practices—Sexual acts that tear or break the skin carry a higher risk of STDs. Even small cuts that don't bleed let germs in and out. Anal sex poses a high risk because tissues in the rectum break easily.
- Get immunized— A vaccination is available that will help prevent hepatitis B.

Finally...

Every woman should know how to protect herself and partners from STDs. If you think you have an STD, seek medical treatment to avoid long-term health problems.