

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are also commonly referred to as venereal disease, and are some of the most common diseases that you can get from another person through sexual contact. With more than 20 STDs in existence, they affect more than 13 million men and women in the United States. Luckily, most are treatable. How do you know if you might have one? What is the best treatment? The following information should help answer these questions.

What are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

STDs are diseases that are normally passed from one person to another through sexual contact. They can be relatively harmless or they can be painful, irritating, debilitating and even life threatening.

What causes STDs?

Bacteria and viruses that thrive in warm, moist environments within the body cause STDs.

How do STDs spread?

Most STDs are spread through bodily fluid transfers during sexual activity. Sexual activity can be defined as vaginal, anal or oral sex. However, there are some STDs that are transmitted by contact with infected blood. For instance, a STD may pass between people who share infected needles, while another STD may be passed from an infected mother to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or nursing.

STDs cannot be transmitted through casual contact (e.g., shaking hands) or objects such as clothing or toilet seats.

What are the symptoms for STDs?

Often there are no symptoms. However, some symptoms that may be indicative of a STD are the following:

- an unusual discharge or odor from the vagina
- pain in the pelvic area – the area between the belly button and genitals
- pain in the groin area – the area around the genitals
- genital burning or itching
- bleeding from the vagina that is not a regular period
- pain deep inside the vagina during sexual intercourse
- penile drip or discharge
- sores, bumps or blisters near the genitals, rectum or mouth
- burning and pain during urination or bowel movement
- frequent urination

Who is at risk for STDs?

STDs can affect men and women of all backgrounds and economic levels. However, some research suggests that STDs may be most prevalent among teenagers and young adults since they are more likely to have multiple sex partners during their lifetime. Individuals who are using dirty needles when injecting intravenous drugs are also at risk.

How are STDs diagnosed?

Most STDs can be diagnosed through an examination by a doctor, a culture of the secretions from the vagina or penis, or a blood test.

What are the most common types of STDs and how are they treated?

Chlamydia: This is the most common of all bacterial STDs, with an estimated four to eight million new cases each year, and is transmitted through vaginal and anal sex. Sometimes, it goes undiagnosed since it frequently does not produce noticeable symptoms. If symptoms are present in men, they typically include painful urination or a discharge from the penis. Symptoms in women may include bleeding between periods, painful urination, vaginal discharge or mild pain in the lower abdomen. Once diagnosed, a person can be treated with an antibiotic.

Gonorrhea: Approximately 400,000 cases are reported each year in the United States. It is transmitted through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Like chlamydia, this STD is often present without symptoms. However any symptoms would most likely involve penile or vaginal discharge and painful urination. Gonorrhea is treatable with antibiotics.

Syphilis: This is a potentially life-threatening, bacterial STD commonly transmitted through vaginal, anal or oral sex. However, it can also be spread by non-sexual contact if the sores caused by the syphilis come in contact with the broken skin of a non-infected individual. Usually, the first symptom is a painless open sore that frequently appears around the penis or vagina but can also appear near the mouth, anus or hands. To date, penicillin has been proven to be the most effective treatment. If syphilis remains untreated, it may progress to more advanced stages and may result in medical conditions like a stroke or meningitis.

Genital Herpes: This STD is caused by an infection with the Herpes Simplex Virus Type 2 (HSV-2) and spreads by direct skin-to-skin contact with the infected site during vaginal, anal or oral sex. Another strain of the virus, Herpes Simplex Type 1 (HSV-1) is most commonly spread by nonsexual contact and usually causes sores on the lips but it can also be transmitted through oral sex. There is no known cure for HSV but symptoms can be treated with antiviral drugs.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS): AIDS results from an infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and is an incurable and deadly STD. It attacks the body's immune system and is most commonly transmitted through vaginal, oral and anal sex. It may also be transmitted by blood through the sharing of infected needles or other sharp instruments that break the skin or from an infected mother to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or nursing. When first infected, some people experience no symptoms while others have flu-like symptoms. These symptoms usually disappear within one to four weeks and the virus can remain inactive for years. There is no known cure, but antiviral drugs can be used to prolong the life and health of an infected person.

Hepatitis B: This viral STD, also referred to as HBV, is a serious virus that attacks the liver. It can be transmitted through vaginal, oral and anal sex. It may also be transmitted by blood through the sharing of infected needles or other sharp instruments that break the skin. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 120,000 new hepatitis B infections occur each year. About a third of the people with hepatitis B have no symptoms. However, when symptoms are present, they can include fever, headache, muscle aches, fatigue, loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhea. Since hepatitis B attacks liver cells, it can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer, liver failure and possibly death. Symptoms that indicate involvement of the liver include dark urine, abdominal pain and yellowing of the skin or whites of the eyes. There is no known cure for hepatitis B but there are medications available to treat chronic infection in some patients. A vaccine is now available and is the best protection.

Genital Warts: These warts are caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV) and are transmitted through vaginal, anal or oral sex. The results are painless, fleshy, cauliflower-like warts that grow on the penis and in and around the entrance of the vagina or anus. According to the CDC, there are approximately 5.5 million new cases each year in the United States. There is no known cure but they can be treated by topical medications and can sometimes be removed with minor surgical procedures (e.g., chemicals, freezing, laser).

Trichomoniasis: This common bacterial STD, transmitted through sexual contact, mainly affects young, sexually active women. Sometimes there are no symptoms associated with this STD. However, in women, symptoms can include foul smelling or frothy, yellow-green vaginal discharge, vaginal itching or redness, pain during intercourse, lower abdominal discomfort and/or frequent urination. In men, symptoms can include discharge from the penis, frequent urination and/or painful urination. Trichomoniasis can be easily treated with antibiotics.

Frequently Asked Questions:

How can STDs be prevented?

The following behaviors and conditions can help decrease your risk for STDs:

- avoid sexual contact with infected persons
- have a mutually monogamous sexual relationship with an uninfected partner
- limit your number of sexual partners throughout your lifetime
- correctly and consistently use a condom
- use clean needles if you are injecting intravenous drugs

Can STDs cause any other health problems?

Some STDs can spread into the uterus and fallopian tubes and may subsequently cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which is frequently linked to both infertility and ectopic pregnancy. STDs can also be passed from a mother to her baby before or during birth or through breastfeeding. There has also been some indication that the human papillomavirus infection (HPV) may cause cervical cancer.

What if I am pregnant?

If you are pregnant and have symptoms of a STD, you should contact your doctor immediately. STDs during pregnancy can put a baby at risk if not addressed quickly and properly.

Can I get a STD by open-mouth kissing?

Open-mouth kissing is considered a very low-risk activity for the transmission of STDs, particularly HIV. However, prolonged open-mouth kissing could damage the mouth or lips and allow HIV to pass from an infected person to a partner and then enter the body through cuts or sores in the mouth. Because of this possible risk, the CDC recommends that a person avoid open-mouth kissing with an infected partner.

Should I be checked for STDs?

If you are at risk for having an STD, if you have any symptoms or if you just have concerns, you should see a doctor. It is recommended that HIV, HBV and syphilis testing and perhaps cultures be performed periodically if you have unprotected sex with multiple partners.