

FACTSHEET

STIs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS STDs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

Key aspects briefly summarized

- STIs are a common health concern worldwide and can be managed and treated with early detection (regular testing) and intervention.
- Safer-sex practices are important with consistent and proper use of condoms during sexual intercourse.
- Get tested when unprotected sexual activity has occurred during travel, regardless of whether symptoms are present or not.

International travelers engaging in casual sex are at increased risk for acquiring sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. The excitement of being abroad and meeting new people may encourage travelers to behave differently and to take more risks than they would at home. Always be aware that unprotected sex and multiple new sex partners are a risk for STIs. Untreated STIs can cause major complications and can be transmitted to other partners.

Disease

STIs are infections transmitted through sexual contact (through vaginal, anal or oral sex) and are caused by more than 30 different bacteria, viruses or parasites entering and growing in or on your body. Often, more than one STI can be transmitted at the same time. Some of the important or frequent STIs are human papilloma virus, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes simplex, syphilis, HIV (see [factsheet HIV-AIDS](#)), hepatitis B.

Occurrence / Risk areas

STIs occur worldwide and can affect anyone, regardless of the individual's sexual orientation, economic level or hygiene standards. STIs are hyperendemic in many resource-limited countries.

Transmission

STIs are usually spread through unprotected vaginal, oral or anal sex, but can also be transmitted through other intimate physical contact, like herpes and the human papillomavirus (HPV) which spread by skin-to-skin contact. Others can also be transmitted through non-sexual means such as via blood. Many STIs - including syphilis, hepatitis B, HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhea, herpes, and HPV - can also be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy and childbirth.

Symptoms

- Painful or frequent urination
- Unusual discharge from the penis or vagina
- Sores or warts on the genital area
- Abnormal vaginal or anal itching, soreness or bleeding, redness in the genital area
- Blisters or sores in or around the mouth
- Abdominal pain
- Fever

Note: An STI can also be present without or with only mild symptoms. Even if you are not aware of it, you can infect others.

Diagnostics

STIs may be diagnosed during a physical exam or through examination of a sore or fluid swabbed from the vagina, penis or anus. Blood tests can help to come to a diagnosis. Even if you don't have symptoms, talk to your physician if you had casual unprotected sex abroad, because early detection and treatment are vital to prevent onward transmission and complications due to untreated STIs.

FACTSHEET

STIs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS STDs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

Treatment

Many STIs are curable and medications are available to help manage the symptoms of others. Antibiotics can treat STIs caused by bacteria or parasites. There is no cure for STIs caused by viruses, but medicines can often help with the symptoms and lower your risk of spreading the infection. Seeking early treatment will reduce the risk of complications, because if left untreated, some STIs can result in long-term health problems, for example infertility, birth complications, and some types of cancer. If a pregnant woman has an STI, it can cause serious health problems for the baby. Sexual partners should also be treated at the same time to prevent reinfection.

Prevention

- Use condoms every time you have anal or vaginal intercourse. Correct and consistent use of condoms greatly reduces but does not completely eliminate the risk of catching or spreading STDs.
- Get vaccinated! There are vaccines to protect against HPV, hepatitis A and hepatitis B.
- Talk to any new partners about protected sex.
- Be aware that alcohol or drugs are linked to increased risky behavior without using proper preventive measures.
- Be aware that the more sex partners you have the higher the chance to acquire an STI. But you may acquire a STI even from a single partner.
- Do not have sex if you have an untreated STI. People with a newly diagnosed STI must notify their previous sex partners so that they can also be treated.

Descriptions of most common STIs (alphabetical order):

Chlamydia trachomatis

This is a bacterium and can be treated with antibiotics. Chlamydia can cause unusual discharge from the penis or vagina, discomfort during urination and abdominal pain. Often there are no symptoms, but if left untreated it can cause infertility and the disease can be transmitted to sexual partners. The bacteria can also be transmitted to the fetus during pregnancy or to the infant during delivery, causing eye infections or pneumonia.

Herpes simplex

Caused by a virus, can not be cured, but can be controlled with medication. Symptoms are typically painful watery skin blisters on or around the genitals, anus or mouth. After initial infection, the virus rests dormant in the body and symptoms can reappear for years, but there is medication to manage outbreaks. Pregnant women may pass the infection to their newborns, causing a life-threatening infection.

Gonorrhea

Caused by a bacterium and can be treated with antibiotics. Most common symptoms include discharge from the vagina or penis and painful or difficult urination – the infection may also be asymptomatic. In both men and women, gonorrhea can also infect the mouth, throat, eyes, and rectum and can spread to the blood and joints, where it can become a life-threatening illness. If left untreated, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to chronic pelvic pain and infertility. It can be transmitted to the fetus during pregnancy. To prevent health complications and sexual transmission, treatment should be provided promptly for all persons testing positive.

Viral Hepatitis

- **Hepatitis A (HAV)**
Hepatitis A is a vaccine-preventable liver infection caused by the hepatitis A virus. HAV is found in the stool and blood of people who are infected. Hepatitis A can be transmitted through contaminated water and food and during anal-oral sexual activity. Patients suffer from an acute and often severe illness but recover spontaneously.
- **Hepatitis B (HBV)**
The hepatitis B virus is spread through sexual contact, as well as through contact with other body fluids, such as blood. HBV can cause a serious liver infection that can result in both immediate illness and lifelong infection, and may lead to

FACTSHEET

STIs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS STDs - SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES

permanent liver scarring (cirrhosis) and cancer. Pregnant women with HBV can transmit the virus to their infant during delivery. In the beginning of the infection, you may not have symptoms, but the virus can be passed to sexual partners. Hepatitis B can be treated with antiviral medications but can be cured only rarely. Vaccination can prevent HBV infection.

- **Hepatitis C (HCV)**

Most commonly HCV is transmitted through exposure to infected blood. Less commonly, it can spread through anal sexual contact or from mother to child during pregnancy and delivery. Most infected people may not be aware of their infection because they do not develop symptoms, but this chronic infection can lead to liver cirrhosis and cancer. HCV can be treated, there is no vaccination.

HIV/AIDS → see [factsheet HIV-AIDS](#)

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

HPV is the most common STI. There are more than 100 different types of HPV and some of them can cause genital/anal/oral warts and cervical, penis or oropharyngeal cancer. Symptoms can even develop years after having sex with someone who was infected. Two available vaccines protect against most (but not all) HPV types that cause cervical, penile or anal cancer.

Syphilis

Is caused by a bacterium and can be treated with antibiotics. The first sign is a chancre, a painless sore on the genitals, mouth, skin or rectum which is highly infectious and will resolve spontaneously after 3 to 6 weeks. Because it is painless not all patients are aware of this lesion. However, typically the body does not clear the infection on its own. Skin rash, a sore throat and muscle aches may develop during the second stage. Untreated, the disease may remain hidden (latent) without any symptoms. About 1/3 infected persons with untreated syphilis will develop complications known as late (tertiary) syphilis. In this stage, the disease may affect all organs, most often the brain, nerves, and eyes. The infection can pass to the fetus during pregnancy and to the infant during delivery.

Trichomoniasis

Is caused by a parasite, which can be treated with a single dose of antibiotic medication. Trichomoniasis can cause a foul-smelling vaginal discharge, genital itching and painful urination in women. Men typically have less or no symptoms. Complications include a risk of premature delivery for pregnant women. To prevent reinfection, both sexual partners should be treated.

Zika → see [factsheet Zika](#)

Is caused by a virus. In most cases, it is primarily spread by mosquitoes. But it can also be transmitted sexually. Getting Zika during pregnancy can cause birth defects like microcephaly (small head associated with neurological deficits) in the developing fetus. The only way to prevent sexual transmission of this virus during pregnancy is to use precautions (condoms) or to avoid sex (at least 2 months after return) with someone who has recently traveled to a risk area, even if the traveler does not have symptoms.

Further Information / References

- Love Life. www.lovelife.ch
- Sexuelle Gesundheit Schweiz. www.sexuelle-gesundheit.ch
- World Health Organization (WHO). Factsheets. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs). 14 June 2019: [www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-\(stis\)](http://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sexually-transmitted-infections-(stis))
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Factsheet: Information for Teens and Young Adults: Staying Healthy and Preventing STDs (2017): www.cdc.gov/std/life-stages-populations/stdfact-teens.htm
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). How You Can Prevent Sexually Transmitted Diseases: www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Sexual Transmission and Prevention. Zika Virus: www.cdc.gov/zika/prevention/protect-yourself-during-sex.html
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Zika and Pregnancy; Pregnant Women and Zika (March 2021): www.cdc.gov/pregnancy/zika/protect-yourself.html