

# STDs: Common Symptoms & Tips on Prevention

## What are sexually transmitted diseases?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections you can get by having sex with someone who has an infection. These infections are usually passed by having intercourse, but they can also be passed through other types of sex. STDs can be caused by viruses or bacteria. STDs caused by viruses include hepatitis B, herpes, HIV and the human papilloma virus (HPV). STDs caused by bacteria include chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis.

## Am I at risk for having an STD?

If you've ever had sex, you may be at risk for having an STD. Your risk is higher if you have had many sex partners, have had sex with someone who has had many partners or have had sex without using condoms. Some common symptoms of STDs are listed in the box below.

### Common signs/symptoms of STDs

- Itching around the vagina and/or discharge from the vagina for women
- Discharge from the penis for men
- Pain during sex, when urinating and/or in the pelvic area
- Sore throats in people who have oral sex
- Pain in the anus for people who have anal sex
- Chancre sores (painless red sores) on the genital area, anus, tongue and/or throat
- A scaly rash on the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet
- Dark urine, loose, light-colored stools, and yellow eyes and skin
- Small blisters that turn into scabs on the genital area
- Swollen glands, fever and body aches
- Unusual infections, unexplained fatigue, night sweats and weight loss
- Soft, flesh-colored warts around the genital area

## Should I be checked for STDs?

See your doctor if you're at risk for having an STD, if you have any STD symptoms or if you have concerns about whether you have one. STDs can cause problems if left untreated.

For example, chlamydia can lead to problems that can cause women not to be able to have children. HPV can lead to cancer of the cervix or penis, and syphilis can lead to paralysis, mental problems, heart damage, blindness and death.

## How are STDs diagnosed?

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

## Can STDs be prevented?

Yes. The only sure way to prevent STDs is by not having sex. If you have sex, you can lower your risk by only having sex with someone who isn't having sex with anyone else and who doesn't have an STD.

You should always use condoms when having sex, including oral and anal sex.

## **What else should I do?**

Limit the number of sex partners you have. Ask your partner if he or she has an STD and tell your partner if you have had one. Talk about whether you've both been tested for STDs and whether you should be tested.

Look for signs of an STD in your sex partner. But remember that STDs don't always show their symptoms. Don't have sex if you or your partner are being treated for an STD.

Wash your genitals with soap and water and urinate soon after you have sex. This may help clean away some germs before they have a chance to infect you.

## **Do condoms prevent STDs?**

Male latex condoms can reduce your risk of getting an STD if used correctly. Be sure to use them every time you have sex, during all types of sex, including vaginal, anal and oral sex. Female condoms aren't as effective as male condoms, but should be used when a man does not use a male condom.

Remember, though, that condoms aren't 100% safe and can't protect you from coming in contact with some sores, such as those that can occur with herpes, or warts, which can occur with HPV infection.

## **Should I use a spermicide to help prevent STDs?**

No. It was once thought that spermicides with nonoxynol-9 could help prevent STDs much like they help prevent pregnancy -- by damaging the organisms that cause the diseases. New research has shown that nonoxynol-9 can also irritate a woman's vagina and cervix, actually increasing the risk of STD infection.

Be sure to also check the ingredients of any other sex-related products you own, such as lubricants and condoms. Some brands of these products may have nonoxynol-9 added to them. If you are unsure if your spermicide or any other product contains nonoxynol-9, ask your doctor before using it.

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This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.

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