

Sexually transmitted diseases

Family Health Center

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What are they?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STD's) are those diseases which spread through very intimate physical contact, usually sexual intercourse. In the past, sexually transmitted diseases were known as venereal diseases ("VD").

Anyone who engages in intimate physical contact can get an STD and pass it to another person, even with the first sexual experience. Often people are infected with more than one STD at the same time.

STD's can have serious consequences. You should consider it your responsibility to inform any sexual partner. He/she needs to know the specific type of infection and what treatment you are using.

Who gets them?

Sexually transmitted diseases are not confined to the young, the poor, or those who make a living through prostitution. Anyone who engages in intimate physical contact can get STD's. Even unborn babies can contract STD's from the mother if she has been infected.

What causes them?

- **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)** is a disease that is caused by the *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV). AIDS damages the body's immune system resulting in infections and cancers that would not usually be a threat to healthy people. These illnesses are often referred to as "opportunistic" infections and malignancies. The HIV virus attacks a person's normal immune system so that it can not fight these opportunistic infections.

There is no cure for AIDS. There are several new treatments which seem to prolong the life of individuals infected with the HIV virus, but eventually all individuals infected with HIV will die from AIDS.

AIDS is spread by used needles, blood, and intimate physical contact. If you think you are at risk for

AIDS, ask your family physician for more information and possible testing.

- **Chlamydia** is a bacterium which can cause many infections in men and women. Infection usually starts about 7 - 21 days after having sexual intercourse with an infected person.

In the female, Chlamydia may cause infection of the cervix, urethra, or fallopian tubes, which is also known as *pelvic inflammatory disease* (PID). PID can cause swelling and scarring in the fallopian tubes which can lead to permanent damage and may leave the women sterile (unable to have a baby).

In the male, Chlamydia is a common cause of infection in the urethra (within the penis). This infection may spread to the tubes around the testicles, causing *epididymitis*.

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics usually given as tablets. It is mandatory that all partners be treated to eliminate the disease and avoid reinfection.

- **Condylomata Acuminata** - Genital warts or *condylomata acuminata* are a common form of a viral infection (*human papilloma virus*) in males and females. These warts differ in structure from the common type of skin warts that people get on their fingers and other skin areas. The virus is transmitted by sexual contact (including oral, vaginal, and anal intercourse) with an individual who carries the virus or who has genital warts. You do not get the virus from toilet seats, kissing, or non-sexual contact.

The warts are very contagious at early stages, but are less so when they have been present for a long time. There are many people who carry the virus but do not have genital warts. Unfortunately these people still are contagious. Four subtypes of human papilloma virus have been closely linked to development of cervical cancer. A vaccine against these subtypes is recommended for females 9-26, ideally prior to initiating sexual intercourse.

There is no cure for condyloma although condyloma can be treated. There are several types of treatment including topical medication, cryotherapy (freezing), electro-surgery and laser surgery. There is no method which can guarantee that the warts will not come back

although the chance of warts coming back tends to lessen with each treatment.

- **Gonorrhea** is caused by bacteria known as *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. If left untreated, gonorrhea can eventually cause arthritis, sterility, or other complications. The bacteria are always passed by sexual contact.

Females may have discharge from the vaginal area or a slight burning sensation when urinating. As the disease progresses, she may develop pelvic inflammatory disease, which is a very serious infection and can lead to sterility.

In males, symptoms usually appear 2 - 7 days after becoming infected. The most common symptoms are discharge or pus from the penis and burning sensation when urinating.

Treatment for gonorrhea is with antibiotics. As with Chlamydia, it is mandatory that all sexual partners of the infected person are treated to prevent reinfection.

- **Hepatitis B** is an infection which is caused by one of many viruses in the hepatitis virus family. It is spread by used needles, blood, and intimate physical contact. Hepatitis is a sudden infection predominantly attacking the liver. Symptoms can include nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain, and yellowing skin, with rare cases of overwhelming liver failure and death. It is also possible to transmit the infection from mother to fetus.

An effective vaccine is now available and should be given to all high risk individuals. There is no treatment for hepatitis B. In extreme cases with overwhelming liver failure, liver transplantation may be considered.

- **Herpes** is a disease caused by a virus called *herpes simplex virus*. Symptoms include painful blisters and sores in the genital area, painful urination, low grade fever and other flu-like symptoms. Most people know when recurrence is about to happen because they feel itching, tingling, or pain in the places where they've been infected before. The virus can be "reactivated" by periods of stress, illness or pregnancy.

There is no cure for herpes. There is a medication which can be helpful in reducing the pain and shortening the course of infection. It is also possible to spread herpes from mother to infant during the birth process. For this reason, some women must deliver their babies by *cesarean section* instead of vaginally.

- **Syphilis** is a very serious disease caused by bacteria known as *Treponema pallidum* that spreads throughout the body.

The first symptom is usually a small painless sore on the penis or vagina. The sore disappears within a few weeks and may never be noticed. Shortly after the sore disappears, a rash, swollen glands, fever, and fatigue may be noticed. After these early infection stages, syphilis may become dormant for several years and then recur damaging the brain, spinal cord, heart, or other organs. It can also be transmitted to unborn infants.

Syphilis can be treated with antibiotics to prevent complications.

- **Trichomonas** (also known as "trich") is a microscopic organism which is not normally found in the vagina. This infection is passed from one person to another through sexual contact. In females symptoms commonly include frothy greenish-white thin discharge from the vagina with intense itching. Often times there is pain during intercourse or frequent and painful urination. Sometimes men notice symptoms of pain or burning when urinating or discharge from the penis.

Trichomonas is treated with an antibiotic. All partners must be treated to prevent reinfection.

How do you prevent them?

Safe sex is often thought of as just using a condom. No sex, of any kind, is completely safe. But the safest kind of sex is between two people who aren't infected, are faithful to one another, and don't abuse injectable drugs. If you have any doubts about whether your partner is infected or whether he/she is having sex with anyone else, use latex *condoms* (rubbers) every time you have sex.

Never let someone else's blood, semen, urine, vaginal fluid, or feces get into your anus, vagina, or mouth. Latex condoms should be used during all sex acts, including anal, vaginal, and oral sex.

Even latex condoms are not 100% effective. How well they work depends on if you use them right. Follow the directions on the package.

In summary

- Anyone who has intimate physical contact is at risk for sexually transmitted diseases.
- Most STD's cause symptoms which are annoying, but some of them can cause life threatening complications.
- Many STD's can be treated to prevent complications. Unfortunately, AIDS and Hepatitis B are not curable.
- The safest kind of sex is between two people, who aren't infected, are faithful to one another, and don't use injectable drugs.
- For more information contact your doctor or the American Academy of Family Physicians at familydoctor.org