

Sexually Transmitted Infections

An STI is sometimes referred to as a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or venereal disease (VD).

A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection that can be passed from person to person when having sex. You can get an STI by having vaginal sex, anal sex, or oral sex. There are several different types of STI.

Before becoming sexually active with a new partner or if you have had recent multiple partners is an opportune time to consider STI screening.

What are the main sexually transmitted infections?

The most common STIs are anogenital warts, chlamydia, genital herpes, gonorrhoea, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B, hepatitis C, pubic lice, syphilis and trichomonas.

Anogenital warts are small painless lumps that develop on the genitals and/or around the back passage (anus). They are caused by a germ (virus) called the human papillomavirus (HPV). However, most people infected with HPV *do not* develop visible warts. You can carry the virus without knowing it and can pass it on to other people who may then develop warts. You do not necessarily need to have penetrative sex to pass on infection. Because it can take some time to develop warts after being infected with HPV, if you have just developed noticeable anogenital warts, it does not necessarily mean that either partner has been recently unfaithful. You may have had HPV for a long time without developing warts. Treatment options include applying chemicals to the warts or freezing the warts to destroy them.

Chlamydia is caused by a germ (bacterium) called Chlamydia trachomatis. It is the most common STI in the UK. Symptoms include a vaginal discharge, irregular bleeding in women and a discharge from the penis or pain passing urine in men. You can be infected with chlamydia for months, even years, without realising it, as it often causes no symptoms. However, even if you have no symptoms, you can still pass on the infection and complications may develop if it is left untreated (such as pelvic infection and infertility in women). A short course of an antibiotic medicine clears chlamydia in most cases.

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus. Once you catch this virus it stays with you for life but lies dormant without causing symptoms for most of the time. In fact, many people who are infected with this virus never have symptoms. If symptoms occur, they can range from a mild soreness to many *painful* blisters on the vulva or penis and surrounding area. A first episode of symptoms can last 2-3 weeks but may be shorter. Recurrent episodes of symptoms then develop in some cases from time to time but are usually less severe than the first episode. (It is similar to having cold sores but on the genitals from time to time.) Antiviral medication can ease symptoms when they develop.

Gonorrhoea is caused by a bacterium called *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. Symptoms include a vaginal discharge in women and a discharge from the penis in men. Again, some people infected with gonorrhoea do not develop symptoms. However, even if you have no symptoms, you can still pass on the infection, and complications may develop if it is left untreated (such as pelvic infection and infertility in women). A short course of an antibiotic (sometimes by injection) clears gonorrhoea in most cases.

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is most commonly passed on by sexual contact. HIV attacks cells of the immune system. Over time (usually several years) the immune system weakens so that you cannot defend your body against various bacteria, viruses and other germs. This is when acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) develops. Many infections and conditions can develop if you have AIDS. Treatment with antiretroviral medicines can reduce the viral load of HIV and allow your immune system to work effectively. However, treatment does not clear the virus from the body. Therefore, if you are infected with HIV, you will need monitoring for the rest of your life and treatment is long-term.

Hepatitis B is a virus that primarily attacks the liver. The virus is mainly passed on by sexual contact, sharing contaminated needles to inject street drugs, or from an infected mother to her baby. The hepatitis B virus can cause a short-term (acute) infection, which may or may not cause symptoms. Following an acute infection, some people develop a persistent infection called chronic hepatitis B. Many people with chronic hepatitis B remain well but can still pass on the virus to others (as they are carriers). Some develop serious liver problems. If needed, antiviral medication may prevent or reduce the severity of liver inflammation and liver damage.

Hepatitis C is a virus that primarily attacks the liver. Most cases occur in people who share needles contaminated with traces of infected blood, in order to inject street drugs. There is a small risk that an infected person can pass on the virus whilst having sex. Some people clear the infection naturally. Some people with persistent (chronic) infection remain free of symptoms but some have symptoms. After many years of infection, some people develop a severe scarring of the liver (cirrhosis) and some develop liver cancer. Treatment is difficult but it can clear the infection in up to half of cases.

8000 people are currently living with HIV in Ireland.

Pubic lice (often called crabs) are passed on by close bodily contact.

Syphilis, which can spread in the bloodstream to other parts of the body.

Trichomonas.

This can cause pain on passing water or discharge.

Other conditions that are sometimes thought of as sexually transmitted infections

Several other infections can affect the genital region, so may be mistaken for STIs. Although some of them can sometimes be passed on by sexual contact, they can all be caught in other ways. They include:

- Scabies: a common skin rash caused by a tiny insect (mite).
- Molluscum contagiosum: caused by a virus from skin to skin contact.
- Urethritis: inflammation of the tube that passes out urine from the bladder, caused by STI or injury.
- Balanitis: inflammation of the tip of the penis.
- Pelvic inflammatory disease: infection of the womb and surrounding structures, usually by not always due to an STI.
- Vulvitis: inflammation of the skin just outside the vagina.
- Thrush.
- Cystitis (bladder infection).
- Bacterial vaginosis: caused by overgrowth of germs which live normally in the vagina.

What are the symptoms of a sexually transmitted infection?

Symptoms of each STI can vary, from local symptoms affecting the genitals, to symptoms that affect various other parts of the body. The following is not a full list of all possible symptoms. However, these are the common symptoms to look out for:

- A vaginal discharge.
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding.
- A discharge from the penis.
- A sore, ulcer, rash, or lump that appears on the penis or around the vagina, vulva or back passage (anus).
- Pain when you have sex.
- Pain when you pass urine (although the common reason for this is a urine infection and not an STI).
- Swelling of the glands in your groin.
- But remember, in many cases of STI, no symptoms may develop. However, you can still pass on the infection to others even if you have no symptoms. Therefore, if you think that you may have an STI, it is best to get it checked out.

What should I do if I suspect that I have a sexually transmitted infection?

If you have a symptom that you think is due to an STI, or if you have no symptoms but are worried you have caught an STI then you should see a health professional.

How do you find out if you have an STI?

You can:

- See your GP. Your GP can give advice and may examine you and do screening tests. Some more complicated problems may need referred to an STI clinic (GUM clinic). Many STIs can be successfully managed by your GP. A charge of 70 euro is payable for a basic screening.

- Go to a GUM clinic directly. You do not need a referral from your GP to go to a GUM clinic and are free. In Cork, this is available in the South Infirmery. Please ring 021 4966 844 to avail of this.
- Until you are checked out, and treated if necessary, you should not have sex. This is to prevent you passing on any infection.

Tests

Depending on the initial assessment and examination, the doctor may advise on some tests and ask for your consent to do the tests. Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea are diagnosed usually on a urine test (Please do not pass urine for 2 hours before your appointment). A blood test is necessary for HIV, Hep B and C and syphilis. An examination can show if you have active herpes or warts- there is no screening test for asymptomatic warts or herpes as many people have been exposed and clear this illness themselves. Swabs are sometimes necessary for other infections (cotton wool buds).

Advice about sexual partners

If you are diagnosed with an STI then you will be encouraged to tell any current or recent sexual partners that you have an infection. You are not obliged to do this or to give out any information about other people. However, it is best that any recent sexual partners should know that they might also be infected. They should be offered testing and treatment if necessary, to prevent the infection being spread any further. This telling of sexual partners is sometimes called contact tracing. If you prefer, GUM clinics can contact people anonymously if you do not wish to tell them yourself. You should be aware that recklessly exposing a sexual partner to the risk of infection is against the law.

Treatment

The treatment that you will be offered depends on which STI is found. For example, a short course of antibiotics can usually clear away chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and trichomonas. A cream or lotion can clear pubic lice and scabies. Topical treatments can usually clear most anogenital warts. Treatments for genital herpes, hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV are more involved and complex. You will be given advice about what treatment options you have and given time to ask questions.

If you are prescribed antibiotics then it is important to finish the full course of tablets, or else the infection may not be fully cleared. If you develop side-effects then seek advice from the GUM clinic or from your GP as to what to do. Do not simply stop taking the medication. For some infections you will be asked to return after a course of treatment to check that the infection has gone.

Do not have sex again until the time advised by the clinic. Depending on the infection, this may be for a certain length of time after treatment has finished or it may be until you are given the all clear from a repeat test. The aim is to prevent you from passing on the infection to others.

Prevention

Remember that condoms do not 100% eliminate the risk of STIs but hugely decrease your risk of contracting and passing on infections.

If you think you may have an STI, it is important to be tested. Some STIs can cause serious health problems if left untreated. You should visit your GP if you have any concerns. Book an appointment on www.corkdoctor.com or call 021 4872555.