



## **Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)**

No-one really likes to think about getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD). But avoiding the issue is no protection from being affected by it.

It's quite simple: If you're sexually active, you could be at risk of getting an STD. The only real guarantee that you're not at risk is if you're in a mutually monogamous relationship and have been screened for any infections you may have contracted in the past.

### **Get over the embarrassment**

Getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD) is probably one of the biggest dreads for any sexually active woman. But however upset or annoyed you may be about discovering you have an STD, it's probably more embarrassing to pass one on. So the best reaction is swift action.

It's completely understandable that you may be uncomfortable (in more ways than one) dealing with an STD. However, treatment is usually very simple and successful — and much better than suffering in silence with unpleasant symptoms, or passing them on to another sexual partner.

### **If you get an STD, you're not alone.**

It might not be much comfort, but if you do get an STD you're certainly not alone. In fact, rates are rising fast. Chlamydia has increased by a massive 150 percent between 1998 and 2007<sup>1</sup>. During the same time period, herpes also increased by 51 percent and gonorrhoea increased by 42 percent.

Even more surprising, syphilis (often thought of as a Victorian-style malady) is very much a modern trend, having boomed by 1,828 percent between 1998 and 2007<sup>1</sup>. Although more than half of these diagnoses were in men who have sex with men, syphilis infection has also risen dramatically among women and heterosexual men too. So please don't assume it's only other people who are at risk.

### **Diagnosis is better than not being tested**

Far from being a concern for the minority of us, STDs affect many, many people.

According to the Health Protection Agency, there were 354,628 new diagnoses of STDs at genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics in 2007<sup>2</sup>. While

59% of these diagnoses were for men, that still leaves 146,757 women having been diagnosed with STDs in 2007 alone.

Perhaps even more worrying is that many more cases will no doubt have gone undiagnosed. In particular, chlamydia can often be symptomless. Although it can have serious side-effects, many people have no idea that they are infected and therefore don't come forward for testing.

Given that there are no warning signs to respond to, it's hardly surprising that chlamydia is spreading so fast, especially among young people. In fact, between April 2005 and March 2006, the National Chlamydia Screening Programme found that more than 10 percent of people under 25 years old have the infection.

### **So why are STD infection rates rising?**

Rising infection levels are thought to be due to lack of money spent on awareness-raising campaigns, while funding for sexual health services has often been diverted within the NHS<sup>1</sup> to plug gaps elsewhere.

As a result, people are simply not being bombarded with safe sex messages as they were in the 1980s when the AIDS tombstone advert first came to our TV screens.

It seems that many of us have forgotten, or never been taught, the simple truth: you're much more likely to get an STD if you don't use a condom every time you have sex.

### **Why young people are at risk**

If you are under 25, you are considered to be at especially high risk of contracting an STD. This is partly because young people are also typically more sexually active than older age groups and more likely to take risks.

Young people are also more likely to use condoms inconsistently and incorrectly<sup>2</sup>. It has been estimated that about a quarter of sexually active young people aged 16-19 years never or rarely use condoms with their current partner<sup>3</sup>.

Young women are also more vulnerable to gonorrhoea, chlamydia and HPV because STD infections can penetrate the cervix of young women more easily than that of older women<sup>4</sup>.

### **Getting tested is vital for your health**

If you're young and have never had to worry about STDs before, you may also be more reluctant to get treatment for an STD. Or maybe you're unsure where to go and so delaying getting tested.

However it is so important to get checked for STDs because gonorrhoea and chlamydia can both cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can lead to infertility<sup>4</sup>. Infection with human papillomavirus (HPV) can lead to cervical cancer. And if you're pregnant, syphilis and herpes could even cause spontaneous abortion or stillbirth.

### **Over 40s are increasingly at risk too**

Although young people are most at risk, STDs are actually rising fastest among people over 45<sup>5</sup>, according to a study by The Health Protection Agency (HPA),

One of the reasons seems to be that if you're single again after being in a long relationship, you may not realise just how much the risks of getting an STD have increased. Yet with the advent of internet dating, it's never been easier to meet new partners and initiate sexual contacts.

However, as Lisa Power, of the HIV charity Terrence Higgins Trust, rightly pointed out: "Sex is not the preserve of the young and gonorrhoea and syphilis are no respecters of age... Rates of infections are far higher than 10 or 20 years ago, so remember to use condoms and get a check up if you are concerned."<sup>5</sup>

### **How to protect yourself from STDs**

To protect yourself as effectively as possible from STDs, it's important to remember that a condom should be put on before any intimate skin contact. A condom should then be kept on during all sexual activity — including oral, vaginal and anal sex — whether or not your partner has ejaculated.

It's also worth remembering that some STDs, such as pubic lice and genital warts, can even be passed on through close genital contact, so you don't necessarily need to have penetrative sex to be at risk.

### **How to get treatment for STDs**

Getting tested for an infection is likely to involve a urine test and simple swabs being taken from the vagina, which is not usually painful.

You can get screened for all STDs at any sexual health clinic (sometimes called GUM clinics). Service is free and confidential plus you'll get advice and support on safe sex and STDs. You don't even need to go to your GP first. You can either ring for an appointment, or pop into a drop-in session, even if you don't live locally.

Terrence Higgins Trust also runs 'Fastest' clinics in many local communities, which provide a fast, free and totally confidential sexual health check up, including screening for chlamydia<sup>6</sup>.

You can even get a free take away kit to take a swab and urine sample at home, then post the samples back and receive your results usually a week later. For more information, visit <http://www.tht.org.uk>.

To find your local sexual health clinic, look in your local phone directory under 'Health Centres' or 'Clinics', or call NHS direct on 0845 4647.

**References:**

1. <http://www.avert.org/stdstatisticuk.htm>
2. [http://www.brook.org.uk/content/2005\\_05\\_19\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://www.brook.org.uk/content/2005_05_19_full_report.pdf)
3. *The Pillarbox / Channel 4 survey of young people's sexual conduct*. 2000. University of Southampton, Centre for Sexual Health Research.
4. [http://www.inforhealth.org/pr/j41/j41chap2\\_1.shtml](http://www.inforhealth.org/pr/j41/j41chap2_1.shtml)
5. "[All new episodes seen at GUM clinics: 1998-2007. United Kingdom and country specific tables](#)", Health Protection Agency, July 2008.
6. <http://www.tht.org.uk/howwecanhelpyou/hivandsttesting/youngandfree/>

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A wide range of women's health resources are available at [www.healthywomen.org.uk](http://www.healthywomen.org.uk)

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