



Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Overview

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are usually passed on by unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex².

Rates have risen steadily over the last ten years across the UK¹. According to the Health Protection Agency (HPA), they rose by six percent in 2007 over the previous year from 375,843 to 397,990¹.

The three most common are chlamydia, genital warts and gonorrhoea¹, and you're most at risk if you're aged between 16 and 24¹.

Female and male condoms can protect you from STDs but they won't protect you from those transmitted via skin-to-skin contact, such as pubic lice and the HPV virus, responsible for genital warts and cervical cancer².

Most STDs can be successfully treated, but not all can be cured².

You may feel embarrassed about talking to your GP about STDs, but there are plenty of genito-urinary (GUM) or sexual health clinics, where you can make an appointment for tests².

If you test positive for a STD, you need to tell sexual partners as soon as possible^{2, 4}.

STDs and symptoms

Chlamydia

Around 70 percent of women and 50 percent of men don't have any symptoms with chlamydia, a bacterial infection¹.

And around 10 to 40 percent of infected women go on to develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), if untreated¹. This can lead to long-term pelvic pain, blocked fallopian tubes, infertility and ectopic pregnancy².

Chlamydia can also spread to the liver, causing pain and inflammation in women².

Symptoms can show up any time from one to three weeks, many months later, or not until the infection spreads to other parts of your body².

They include²:

- Bleeding between periods and/or heavier periods
- Pain or bleeding after sex
- Pelvic pain
- Unusual vaginal discharge
- Pain when passing urine.

If you're pregnant, chlamydia is linked to early miscarriage or premature birth and can be passed on to your baby, leading to conjunctivitis and/or pneumonia².

In 2002, a chlamydia screening programme was launched, covering 85 areas³. *For more details, contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647³.*

Genital warts

Genital warts are the most common viral sexually transmitted infection and are caused by the human papilloma virus (HPV).² Although the virus won't pass through a condom, you may still get infected because condoms don't cover the entire genital area².

If you have the virus, you won't necessarily develop genital warts². For most people, including those who have warts, the virus will go on its own². If they do appear, it may take from three weeks to many months or even years, to come out². Warts are usually found on the vulva, cervix and upper thighs, in the vagina and on or inside the anus². They are often so small that that you don't even know you have them. They can be flat or smooth small bumps or quite large, pink, cauliflower-like lumps².

Gonorrhoea

About 50 percent of women and ten percent of men with gonorrhoea, a bacterial infection, won't have any obvious signs or symptoms¹.

It can cause serious health problems, such as infertility in both women and men, and if you're pregnant, it can be passed onto your unborn baby².

Symptoms can appear one to 14 days after being infected, many months later, or not until the infection spreads to other parts of your body².

They include²:

- Unusual vaginal discharge which may be thin or watery, yellow or green
- Pain when passing urine
- Lower abdominal pain and bleeding between periods or heavier periods
- Pelvic inflammatory disease.

Genital herpes

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV) and is the most common ulcerative STD in the UK¹.

The virus enters the body through small cracks in the skin or through the moist soft lining of the mouth, vagina, rectum and urethra¹.

It then lays dormant, hiding around the nerves in the part of the body where you were infected. While it 'sleeps', you are not infectious and won't have any symptoms¹.

The herpes virus is most likely passed on just before, during and straight after an episode and can be passed on to an unborn baby, if pregnant².

Symptoms include²:

- Mild soreness and groups of small painful blisters appearing on the genitals and surrounding areas
- Pain when passing urine and a stinging or tingling in the anus or genital area
- Flu-like symptoms such as fever, tiredness, headache, swollen glands, aches and pains.

Some people can have recurrent attacks¹.

Certain genital HPV infections can cause cervical cancer, other cancers and genital warts².

Non-specific urethritis

Non-specific urethritis is inflammation of the urethra when the cause is not yet known and gonorrhoea has been ruled out².

It's more difficult to diagnose in women as a number of things may cause non-specific urethritis, such as injury to the urethra or a urinary infection².

Pubic lice and scabies

Pubic lice are yellow-grey parasitic crab-like insects, which live in coarse body hair². Symptoms include black powdery droppings in your underwear, brown eggs on pubic or other body hair, itching and inflammation².

Scabies is caused by tiny parasitic mites, which burrow into the skin and lay eggs². Symptoms include intense itching, especially at night, and a red rash or tiny spots².

Trichomoniasis

Trichomonas is a tiny parasite which causes an infection². In women, the infection can be found in the vagina and the urethra (tube where urine comes out)².

Women usually have itching and soreness in and around the vagina and an unusual discharge which may be yellow, smelly or frothy².

Up to one in two people don't have any symptoms².

Syphilis

Syphilis is a bacterial infection which usually starts off with one or more painless sores where the bacteria entered the body, two to three weeks after being infected².

Sores are usually found on the vulva, the clitoris, cervix, the opening of the urethra and the anus and less commonly, in the mouth, and on the lips, tonsils, fingers or buttocks².

The sores are very infectious and may take two to six weeks to heal². By this time, the bacteria will have spread to other parts of the body and it will then be known as second stage syphilis².

If untreated, symptoms include a painless rash which can spread all over the body, or appear in patches, usually on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet and flat, warty-looking growths on the vulva and anus, often mistaken for genital warts².

Although very rare, long-term infection can lead to damage to the nervous system and death².

Diagnosis

Chlamydia, gonorrhoea, trichomoniasis and syphilis

You may be asked to use a swab or a tampon to collect cells from inside your vagina, or a doctor or nurse may use a swab to collect cells from the cervix during an internal examination, or from the vagina².

The swab is like a small cotton bud and won't hurt although it may feel a little uncomfortable². You may also have cells collected from the entrance of the urethra, rectum, throat or eyes - areas also prone to infection². You may have to wait up to two weeks for results².

For some infections of the urethra, such as chlamydia, you may be asked to provide a urine sample.

For syphilis, you'll be asked to give a blood sample². The doctor or nurse will also examine the vagina and anus internally and externally². They will also check your body for any rashes or warty growths and may use a swab to collect a sample of fluid from any sores².

Genital herpes and genital warts

A doctor or nurse will need to examine you to confirm you have them².

With genital herpes, they'll confirm diagnosis by gently breaking a blister to get a sample of the fluid inside using a swab². Results will take from one to two weeks².

Treatment

Chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis, trichomoniasis and non-specific urethritis

Antibiotics are 95 percent effective, clearing symptoms within one week^{2, 4}.

You'll be prescribed antibiotic tablets either as a single dose or as an injection, or tablets lasting two weeks^{2, 4}.

Please note: Antibiotics may interfere with some contraceptive pills^{2, 4} and should only be taken during pregnancy on the advice of your GP².

Non-specific urethritis can be treated with antibiotics if caused by bacteria².

Genital warts

The treatment will depend on what the warts look like, how many you have and where they are^{2, 4}. Tell the doctor if you're pregnant, as it will affect the type of treatment offered^{2, 4}.

They can be removed by^{2, 4}:

- Applying a cream or liquid for several weeks
- Freezing
- Heat, surgery and laser, all using local anaesthetic.

Genital herpes

Seek treatment as soon as you have the first attack, usually lasting between two to four weeks, and when new blisters are forming^{2, 4}.

It includes^{2, 4}:

- Antiviral tablets daily, sometimes up to five times a day, for five days, to reduce the severity of symptoms
- Longer courses of tablets to reduce the number of attacks called suppressive therapy for people who have more than six a year
- Cooling the area with ice or cold water or bathing in a salt bath can relieve symptoms
- A topical anaesthetic, such as lidocaine gel or applying petroleum jelly can be soothing
- Noting any specific triggers such as stress or being tired.

Pubic lice and scabies

Treatment includes creams, lotions or shampoos for lice, and creams and lotions for scabies, which may have to be reapplied after seven days².

You need to wash clothing, bedding and towels in a washing machine on a very hot cycle (50°C or higher) to kill the lice and mites and avoid re-infection².

Prevention

- Use male and female condoms when you have vaginal, anal and oral sex with new partners and use them correctly². They protect you against other STDs and may provide some protection against getting, or passing on genital warts, particularly if they are used while the warts are present and for the first three months after the warts have gone².
- Avoid sharing sex toys as infections can be passed on².
- Wait for your doctor to give you all clear before having sex again².

More information

To find out your nearest chlamydia screening programme or sexual health clinic, call NHS direct on 0845 4647³.

The Family Planning Agency

www.fpa.org.uk

Helpline: 0845 122 8690

Sources:

1. Health Protection Agency

<http://www.hpa.org.uk/webw/HPAweb&Page&HPAwebAutoListDate/Page/1203348026884?p=1203348026884>

2. The Family Planning Agency

www.fpa.org.uk

3. NHS Choices

<http://www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Sexually-transmitted-infections/Pages/Diagnosis.aspx?url=Pages/What-is-it.aspx>

4. British Association for Sexual Health and HIV

www.bashh.org/

A wide range of women's health resources are available at www.healthywomen.org.uk

Disclaimer: This article is for general information only and is not intended to replace a consultation with a healthcare professional, nor is it intended to provide specific medical advice and should not be used for the diagnosis or treatment of medical conditions.

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