

Taking Charge of Your Sexual Health

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What are sexually transmitted infections (STIs)? STIs are infections that you can get from having sex with someone who has the infection. STIs are bacteria, parasites or viruses.

How do you get an STI? By contact with genitals or mouth (rarely by touching dry skin), or by sharing body fluids (semen, vaginal or anal secretions, breast milk and blood). Some STIs usually infect your sexual and reproductive organs (chlamydia and gonorrhea). Others cause general body infections (HIV, hepatitis B and syphilis). In the U.S., STIs are most common in sexually active people under age 25. Many infected people have no symptoms. Left untreated, STIs cause scarring of the urethra (the tube for urine leaving the bladder) or the uterus and fallopian tubes in women, and this can cause infertility.

How do you prevent STIs? If you are sexually active, talk to your doctor, get tested regularly, and follow the guidelines below to help reduce your risk of contracting STIs.

Know Your Risk

It is important to review your sexual health history and risk factors with your health care provider. Below are five questions to help you assess your risk.

The 5 Ps

Past STIs: Have you ever had an STI? Did you get treated and then confirm that you were cured after treatment?

Partners: In the past six months, how many people have you had sex with?

Practices: What kinds of sexual contact have you had (vaginal, anal, oral)?

Prevention: What do you do now and plan to do in the future to prevent STIs?

Pregnancy planning and prevention: What are you doing to prevent pregnancy now?

Resources to Assess Your Risk for STIs

These links provide tools to help you assess and lower your risk of STIs and unintended pregnancy:

- <http://www.ncshguide.org/downloads/SexualHealthGuide.pdf>
- <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/pubsforms/Guidelines/Documents/CA-STD-Sexual-risk-assessment-and-STD-risk-factors.pdf>
- <http://www.pamf.org/hiv-aids/> Information about HIV/AIDS

Practice Safer Sex

Here are tips to protect yourself and your sexual partners.

Abstinence: Having no sexual contact is the surest way to avoid STIs.

Get tested: Know your and your partner's infection status before having sex for the first time. Get tested again regularly if either partner is having sex with other people.

Use condoms: Use condoms correctly and every time you have sex, but realize that condoms don't protect you 100 percent from all the different ways that STIs can be transmitted. (<http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/birthcontrol/condom.html>)

Practice monogamy: Having sex with only one partner who is also faithful helps protect you against infection.

Limit your number of sexual partners: Your risk of getting STIs increases with the number of sexual partners – even if you use condoms correctly every time you have sex.

Resources for How to Practice Safer Sex

- <http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/std/protection.html>
- <http://www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/default.htm>

Talk to Your Partner

If you and your partner have decided to have sex, talking about STIs in advance is key. Before you talk, here are a few pointers:

- Don't feel pressured into having sex with someone. Make sure it's the right decision for you.
- Know the facts about STIs.
- Know what you want to learn from the conversation, such as: the number of sexual partners they've had, if they practiced safer sex with those partners, whether they've had STIs before and if so, if they were treated.
- Realize that if you are having trouble starting the conversation with a potential sexual partner, you may not be ready to be sexually intimate with that person.
- Plan what to say to your partner. Don't be seduced into sexual activity before you have talked about the risks, possible consequences and responsibility.

Resources to Help You Talk About Sexual Risk

The links below provide further information on STIs and how to better communicate with your partner regarding STIs and preventing them.

- <http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/std/>
- <http://www.pamf.org/teen/sex/virginity/readyornot.html>
- http://kidshealth.org/teen/sexual_health/stds/the_talk.html

Learn More

PAMF provides several tools to help you avoid STIs, including HIV, located on this page: <http://www.pamf.org/hiv-aids/>.

Teens: "HIV RAP Interactive"

Adults: "Know the Risks"

Adults Over 50: "Know the Risks, 50"