

What You Should Know About STDs

Key Points: Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can damage your health, cause emotional distress, and rob you of your ability to have a baby. Condoms don't make sex physically safe. The only sure way to avoid all STDs is to abstain from all forms of genital sexual activity outside marriage.

How are STDs transmitted? All of the six leading STDs infecting teens can be transmitted through *any form of genital contact* with another person, including intercourse and oral sex. Most STDs can be passed from a pregnant woman to her unborn baby or infant, often with life-threatening consequences.

Do condoms prevent the transmission of STDs? No. They provide less than complete protection against HIV/AIDS (15% failure rate); Chlamydia, a significant cause of female infertility (50% failure rate); and human papillomavirus, the cause of cervical cancer (only "some risk reduction"). With some STDs such as herpes and human papilloma virus, condoms don't prevent their transmission because the germs that cause the disease can infect anywhere in the genital region, only part of which is covered by the condom. With other STDs such as HIV/AIDS and Chlamydia that are transmitted by sexual fluids, the man's semen may spill over the rim of the condom, or the woman's secretions may transmit the germs.

Who gets STDs? Persons who have sex with a partner infected by a sexually transmitted disease. This can happen in marriage if your spouse is infected, but it almost always happens outside of marriage because unmarried partners don't know what the other person might be carrying. By age 24, one in three sexually active persons will get an STD.

Who is more at risk—guys or girls? Girls. Biologically, girls are more vulnerable than men to STDs. STDs, including HIV/AIDS, are more easily passed from men to women than from women to men. Women are more likely to suffer long-term health consequences such as infertility, tubal pregnancy, and cervical cancer.

What are the six STDs that most commonly infect unmarried, sexually active young persons, and what are their major health consequences? (1) *Human papilloma virus*, which can cause cervical cancer; (2) *Chlamydia*, which can cause pelvic inflammatory disease, scarring and blocking of the fallopian tubes, and consequent infertility or tubal pregnancy; (3) *herpes 2*, which may cause periodic outbreaks of blisters; (4) *gonorrhea*, which in boys may cause a burning sensation while urinating and in girls may cause pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility; (5) *syphilis*, which untreated can live in the body and eventually damage skin, bones, the liver, heart, and brain; and (6) *HIV/AIDS*, which attacks and gradually destroys the body's immune system.

Can STDs be cured? STDs that are caused by *bacteria*—such as Chlamydia, syphilis, and gonorrhea—can be treated with medication and cured, although consequences such as infertility may be permanent.

STDs that are caused by *viruses*—such as herpes, human papilloma virus, and HIV/AIDS—cannot be cured although some of their symptoms can be treated.

If you have an STD, do you usually know it? No. Most of the time, there are no visible symptoms, and you can pass it on through sexual contact with another person without even realizing it. Examination by a doctor is often necessary to detect the disease. Undetected and untreated, the disease will usually produce symptoms.

What should you do if you have already been sexually active outside marriage? Go as soon as possible to a doctor or clinic for a check-up to see if you have any STDs, get treatment, and then do not engage in sexual intimacy again until you are married.

—William Boudreau, M.D. In Tom and Judy Lickona's *Sex, Love & You: Making the Right Decision* (www.Amazon.com,)