

get
tested

AMERICAN SOCIAL
HEALTH ASSOCIATION

TESTING FOR
SEXUALLY
TRANSMITTED
INFECTIONS

THE
REAL
DEAL

No one likes to talk about it, but HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are out there. You've probably heard the statistics.



**DID YOU
KNOW?**

- > Each year, 1 in 4 sexually active teens gets an STD.
- > 1 in 2 sexually active persons will contract an STD by age 25.
- > Half of all new STD and HIV infections are among people 25 and under.
- > In a survey of U.S. physicians, less than one-third routinely screened patients for STDs.

MOST PEOPLE THINK THEY WOULD KNOW IF THEY HAD AN STD – but in fact many of these infections are silent. Several of the most common STDs have no signs or symptoms in the majority of people infected. Or they have mild signs that can be easily overlooked. This is why the term “disease” is starting to be replaced by infection, or sexually transmitted infection (STI). The only way to know if you have an STI is to get tested.

Lots of people are confused about getting tested for STIs. For example, you may think your annual medical check-up will include tests for STIs, especially if your health care provider knows you are sexually active.

However, the fact is that some health care providers might test for some infections when you come in for a regular checkup, while others do not test for any STI unless you ask them to.

Also, many people incorrectly think:

- > there's a single test that can identify all of the leading STIs;
- > when you ask your health care provider to check you for STIs, he or she will test for every STI; or,
- > a woman's Pap smear and/or pelvic exam will detect STIs.

All of these common beliefs are wrong.



WHAT TESTS DO I NEED?

TESTING FOR STIs CAN BE RELATIVELY QUICK AND EASY...

Unfortunately, there is no simple answer – no standard guideline that all health care providers follow. Each clinic tends to follow its own procedure. And that’s just one reason that you owe it to yourself to ask.

If you’ve had unprotected sex, have a new partner (or more than one), or for any reason are worried you have been exposed to an STI, the American Social Health Association recommends that you ask to be tested for these leading STIs: chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, herpes, and trichomoniasis. If your health care provider feels you do not need to be checked for some of these, you will at least know which ones you were tested for and which ones you were not.

Depending on the type of risk and other factors (such as any symptoms you may be experiencing), your health care provider may want to test for other infections like syphilis, for example, in addition to these.

WHAT ARE THE TESTS?

Testing for STIs can be relatively easy and quick. Some tests can be done with urine samples or a swab of the affected area. Other may require that the health care provider draw a small sample of blood (sometimes with a needle, others with a fingerstick).

STI	TYPE OF TEST	NOTES
Chlamydia	Swab of genital area or urine sample*	The most accurate tests are called “NAATS” (rhymes with ‘bats’). In some cases it’s possible to test for both chlamydia and gonorrhea from one sample.
Gonorrhea	Swab of genital area or urine sample*	
HIV	Blood test or swab from inside of mouth	Confidential and anonymous testing options are available in several kinds of clinics.
Genital herpes (no symptoms)	Blood test (drawn from arm or a fingerstick)	Because there are many inaccurate tests, be sure your test is “gG-based and type-specific.” For a list of accurate herpes blood tests, go to www.ashstd.org
Genital herpes (with genital symptoms)	Swab of affected area; if at first negative for herpes, follow later with blood test to make sure	Must be done as soon as possible; “viral culture” test not as accurate after 48 hours. A negative culture does not mean that you do not have genital herpes.
Trichomoniasis	Swab of infected area, physical exam or sample of discharge	The parasite is harder to detect in men than in women.
HPV (genital warts)	Visual diagnosis	Warts can occur in both men and women.
HPV (cervical infection)	If Pap smear result is atypical or abnormal, HPV DNA test and a biopsy may be performed	Pap smears detect cervical cell changes, not HPV. An abnormal Pap smear is often caused by HPV infection. No test available for men for these types of HPV.

*If you have had oral or anal sex, let your health care provider know this also. These sites may be infected, but vaginal or urine samples may not be positive.



HOW DO I GET TESTED?

Lots of people feel uncomfortable talking about sex and STIs – it’s normal to feel that way. If you feel nervous about getting checked, take a few deep breaths and try to relax. If you can talk to a parent or trusted adult, that can often be a huge relief. It often helps to write down your questions and the important points you want to discuss with your doctor.

You don’t have to feel alone. Ask your partner to go with you to get tested, or take a good friend along for emotional support. You can get the best care by talking honestly about your sex life with your health care provider. You could say something like:

“I’ve had sex with someone new, and we haven’t been using condoms every time. I’d like to get tested for STIs. Which infections do you recommend I be tested for?”

“I think my partner had sex with someone else before me. I want to be tested for STIs. I know I should get checked for chlamydia because of my age. What other STIs should I be tested for?”

Remember, testing will give you important information about whether or not you are infected. In addition, should you be infected, testing provides the opportunity for treatment before serious complications occur. Finally, getting tested doesn’t suggest that you have done something wrong. If you get tested for STIs, you are being responsible – both to yourself and to your partner.

WHERE IS TESTING AVAILABLE?

Your regular health care provider can likely do the tests for the leading STIs. If cost is a concern, visit your county’s STD clinic or public health department, which can provide services at a lower cost than private clinics and may have sliding scale fees based on what you can afford to pay. A few clinics even offer free testing and treatment. Call 1-800-CDC-INFO (1-800-232-4636) to find a clinic near you.

If you are under 18, you don’t need to worry about confidentiality. Teens in any state in the United States can seek testing for STIs without parental consent. If you do this, you will need to think ahead about transportation and whether you can pay for testing and possible treatment on your own.

But consider the whole picture. While talking to your parents about sex can be awkward, more often than not they’d want to know what’s going on in your life and help you. Chances are, they’d rather you take care of your health by being honest with them rather than avoid seeking care and endure the consequences of a silent infection later on.

WHAT IF I TEST POSITIVE?

If the test comes back positive, it can be upsetting to find out you have an STI. Just remember many people are facing the same issues. In the year 2000 alone, there were 18 million new cases of STIs. That’s like nearly everyone in Massachusetts, Alabama, Kansas, and Colorado getting an STI every year. So there’s no reason to feel ashamed or alone.

Taking care of yourself and staying healthy is what’s most important. Take the treatment your doctor prescribed, and make sure any recent partners get tested and treated as needed. If you’re feeling upset or emotional, be sure to talk to someone you trust. With time, these feelings often improve.

HOW CAN I REDUCE MY RISK OF GETTING AN STI?

Abstinence (not having oral, vaginal, or anal sex) is the best way to prevent STIs. For people who choose to be sexually active, methods to reduce the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease include:

- ✔ **MUTUAL MONOGAMY** – having sex with only one, uninfected partner who only has sex with you.
- ✔ Limiting the **NUMBER OF SEX PARTNERS** to reduce possible exposure to STIs.
- ✔ **TALKING WITH YOUR PARTNER(S)** about STIs, sexual health, and prevention prior to sexual activity. Open communication fosters trust and respect among partners and is a key aspect of reducing the risks for STIs.
- ✔ If you or your partner have had other partners, both of you should **GET TESTED** before becoming sexually active with each other. Many STIs can be “silent,” causing no noticeable symptoms in men or women.
- ✔ **USING LATEX CONDOMS** consistently and correctly for all types of sexual contact (oral, vaginal, anal), even if penetration does not take place. If you are allergic to latex, polyurethane condoms can be used instead.



THE LEADING STIs:

Because it's a matter of your health now and in the future, it's important to be informed. There are over 15 different STIs – some cause symptoms some of the time, but most don't. Similarly some are curable and some are not, although all STIs can be treated. The leading STIs among teens and young adults are:

Chlamydia Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STI in the United States with about 3 million new cases every year. Chlamydia usually does not cause any signs or symptoms, but it can damage a woman's reproductive organs, leading to infertility and chronic pain. It's so common that health care providers are supposed to test every sexually active woman under age 26 at least once a year. Unfortunately, this once-a-year screening is not always done. Testing may even need to be performed more frequently if you have new or multiple sex partners. It is important to get screened because of the usual lack of symptoms. Check with your doctor to be sure you've been tested for chlamydia. Early treatment can cure the infection and prevent complications. If you have chlamydia, your partner must also be treated to prevent him or her from spreading the infection back to you or to other partners.

Gonorrhea Gonorrhea is similar to chlamydia in that it's also a bacterial infection that is also most common among teens and young adults. It is spread through sexual activity, but it's important to know that ejaculation does not have to occur for gonorrhea to be spread to a partner. Most women and many men will not notice any symptoms. If symptoms do appear, they can be mild and might include genital discharge, painful urination, or painful sex. Gonorrhea can lead to serious complications in men and women (like infertility) if not treated in time. It's easily cured with antibiotics, but both partners will need to be treated to avoid re-infection.

Genital Herpes About 1 in 4 persons has genital herpes, but up to 90% of them don't know it. One reason is that symptoms are mild and easily confused with a yeast infection, rash, ingrown hairs, a bug bite, or irritation from sex. You can get genital herpes from genital-to-genital contact with a partner who has genital herpes or if a partner with a "cold sore" (oral herpes) performs oral sex on you. You may or may not need to be tested for herpes, but do not assume that such testing will be done automatically – typically doctors do not even test for herpes when they test for other STIs. In addition, there are several kinds of tests for herpes. While there is no cure for herpes, treatment can speed healing and reduce the number of outbreaks. Genital herpes can be passed to a partner even when there are no symptoms, but condoms and antiviral treatment reduce the risk.

HIV HIV is a virus spread through contact with sexual fluids, blood, and breast milk. Over time, HIV can weaken the immune system to the point that it is unable to fight off other infections and may eventually lead to AIDS, but early detection and treatment can help. The only way to tell if you have HIV is to be tested for it. Someone who has any one of these STIs is at least 2-5 times more likely to get HIV if he or she is exposed to the virus through sexual activity, which is why testing and treatment of STIs is so important. Condoms are very effective at preventing transmission of HIV.

Trichomoniasis Trichomoniasis is the most common curable STI in young women. Over 7 million new cases occur each year in women and men. Most men with the infection do not have signs or symptoms. Some women may notice a smelly, yellow-green discharge. Caused by a parasite, the infection is curable, but both partners need to be treated at the same time to avoid re-infection.

HPV – A DIFFERENT CASE?

HPV stands for human papillomavirus. Genital HPV is perhaps the most common of all sexually transmitted infections. Most adults have been exposed to HPV at some point but have cleared the infection. People are often surprised to learn this, considering many of them have never even heard of it.

There are many types of HPV. Some types of HPV can result in genital warts (which are treatable), and some types can lead to an abnormal Pap smear result indicating cell changes on the cervix, a precursor to cervical cancer.

This virus, while quite common, usually does not result in any signs or symptoms, and the immune system is thought to clear the infection over time for most people. This is why HPV testing is rarely done.

In women, the most important issue is to ensure the cervix is healthy, which is why women should go for regular Pap smears once they become sexually active. If the cells are abnormal, a doctor may test for HPV to get more information.

While HPV infection is quite common, cervical cancer is not. This is because the virus usually does not cause problems, and cervical cancer, which takes many years to develop, is preventable through regular Pap smears.

**To learn more about STIs,
prevention, and how to use
a condom, visit ASHA's
Web sites:**

www.ashastd.org

www.iwannaknow.org (for teens)

www.quierosaber.org (en español)

**Email questions or concerns to
ASHA at teen-stinet@ashastd.org.**

