

You Owe It To Yourself: STD Testing and Your Sexual Health

HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are out there – you’ve probably heard the statistics.

Did you know...?

- 1 in 2 sexually active persons will contract an STD by age 25.
- More than half of all people will have an STD at some point in their lifetime.
- In a survey of U.S. physicians, less than one-third routinely screened patients for STDs.

But then the questions begin: Who should be tested? What should a person get tested for? How often should tests be done? There are good answers to many of these questions.

This document will tell you which STDs are the most common, which tests are done for each these infections, and suggest how to access the tests if you need them.

What People Often Think

Lots of people are confused about getting tested. For example, many people think that annual medical check-ups include tests for STDs, especially if health care providers know you are sexually active. The fact is that some health care providers might test for some infections when you come in for an annual checkup, while others do not test for any STD unless you ask them to.

Also, many people incorrectly think:

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

All of these common beliefs are wrong.

While your health care provider can sometimes use one sample (like a swab or urine sample) to perform more than one test, there are several different kinds of tests for the

leading infections out there. For example, some of these tests might require a blood sample while others are based off a urine sample.

THE LEADING STDs:

Because it's a matter of your health now and in the future, it's important to be informed. There are over 15 different STDs – some cause symptoms some of the time, but most don't. Similarly some are curable and some aren't, but all can be treated. Here's a brief summary of the leading STDs:

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STD 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, recent research suggests that fewer than half of women for whom testing is recommended actually get yearly testing. If your doctor hasn't mentioned it to you at the time of your annual exam, check 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.

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, and even if symptoms do appear they are often mistaken for a mild bladder or vaginal infection. However, gonorrhea can lead to serious complications in men and women (like infertility) if not treated in time. It's easily cured with antibiotics and 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. While "classical" herpes presents as painful genital lesions, most genital herpes is not classical. Rather, the *most common* symptoms are mild and easily confused with other common ailments like a yeast infection, ingrown hairs, a bug bite, or irritation from sex. You may

or may not need to be tested for herpes, but do not assume that such testing will be done – typically doctors do not test for herpes when they test for other STDs, so be sure to ask. In addition, there are several kinds of tests for herpes (see below). While there is no cure for herpes, treatment can speed healing and reduce the number of outbreaks. Transmission can occur 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 certain infections and may eventually lead to AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), 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 STDs 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 STDs is so important. Condoms are very effective at preventing transmission of HIV.

Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is the most common curable STD 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. Most adults have been exposed to HPV at some point, which is perhaps the most common of all sexually transmitted infections. People are often surprised to learn this, considering many of them have never even heard of it.

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 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.

What Tests Do I Need?

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 for any reason are worried you have been exposed to an STD, ASHA recommends that you ask your health care provider to be tested for these leading STDs: chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, herpes, and trichomoniasis. If he or she feels you *do not* need to be checked for some of these, you will at least know which ones you were not tested for.

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, instead of or in addition to the one listed.

What Are The Tests?

Testing for STDs 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).

STD	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.ashastd.org/hrc/ .

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; not as accurate after 48 hours. A negative test, however, does not mean that you do not have genital herpes.
Trichomoniasis	Physical exam or sample of discharge	The parasite is harder to detect in men than in women.
HPV	Genital warts: visual diagnosis If Pap smear result is atypical, HPV DNA test may be performed	No test for men in absence of symptoms.

How Do I Get Tested?

Lots of people feel uncomfortable talking about sex and STDs – 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 trusted friend, that can often be a huge relief.

You don’t have to feel all 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 STDs. 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 STDs. I know I should get checked for chlamydia because of my age. What other STDs should I be tested for?”



Remember, testing cannot give you an STD but it 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 STDs, 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 STDs. If cost is a concern, you can visit your county's STD clinic or public health department. Many health departments or STD clinics can provide services at a lower cost than private clinics, and some may have sliding scale fees based on what you can afford to pay. Call 1-800-CDC-INFO 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 STDs 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 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 STD. Just remember many people are facing the same issues. In the year 2000 alone, there were 18 million new cases of STDs. Imagine, that's like nearly everyone in Massachusetts, Alabama, Kansas, *and* Colorado getting an STD every year. So, there's no reason to feel ashamed or alone.

Taking care of yourself 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 about your feelings. With time, these feelings often improve.

How Can I Reduce My Risk Of Getting An STD?

Abstinence (not having oral, vaginal, or anal sex) is the best way to prevent STDs. For people who choose to be sexually active, methods to reduce the risk of contracting a sexually transmitted disease or infection (STD/STI) 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 STDs.
- **Talking with your partner(s)** about STDs, 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 STDs.
- If you or your partner have had other partners, both of you may want to **get tested** before becoming sexually active with each other. Many STDs 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.

To learn more about STDs, prevention, and how to use a condom, you can visit ASHA’s Web sites: www.ashastd.org, www.iwannaknow.org (for teens), and www.quierosaber.org (en español).



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