

Who is at risk?

Anyone who is sexually active is at risk of getting an STI. You can catch an STI whether you are young, old, gay, straight, bisexual, a lesbian, male, female or transgender...

It doesn't matter if you've only had one sexual partner or if you have been with twenty different people - if you have had sex, especially without a condom, you may have an STI.

However, the more people who you have unprotected sex with, the more likely you are to come into contact with an infection.

So, it is even more important to practice safe sex when you have multiple partners, and to be tested between partners to make sure that you are in the clear.

How are STIs passed on?

Many people believe that STIs can only be passed on through penetrative vaginal or anal intercourse, but this is not true. Some STIs can also be passed on through oral sex, joint masturbation (when you share fluids using your fingers), and toy sharing (when you pass toys from your genital area to another person's).

In essence, you can catch or pass on an STI anytime that your bodily fluid comes into contact with another person's. Using condoms and other barrier methods for all types of sexual activity greatly reduces the risk of passing on STIs.

Skin contact alone can be enough to pass on the genital wart virus or herpes, as well as sexual infestations such as crabs, pubic lice, and scabies.

Symptoms

How do I know if I've been infected?

It is often impossible for you to know for sure whether you have an STI unless you have been clinically tested, as many STIs have no obvious signs or symptoms.

You may think that you are okay because you don't have any unusual symptoms, and you may think that your sexual partner is safe because they look 'clean' or seem 'normal'. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, and many people pass on STIs without even realising that they are infected.

Getting yourself and your partner tested is the only way to be sure that you are safe, and you should make regular testing a part of your routine sexual health practice.

However, some people do experience symptoms when they have an STI. The most common symptoms are:

- a burning sensation when weeing or just afterwards
- itching in or around the genital area
- unusual discharge (fishy smelling, yellow, green, pink, or an unusual texture)
- bleeding or pain during sex
- bleeding between periods
- sore/inflamed pelvic area
- rashes, lumps, bumps or broken areas of skin
- discomfort, especially in the abdomen and testicles

You should see your GP or a sexual health professional immediately if you ever experience any of these symptoms.

STI tests

Getting tested may seem scary, but it's always better to know what is happening with your sexual health so that you can deal with any problems as soon as possible.

A full sexual health screen checks that your 'sexual body' is clear of infections and functioning the way it should be. The test will start with a confidential consultation, where a trained and supportive sexual health professional will talk to you about what you have done in the past, what you are likely to do in the future, and whether you have any immediate concerns or questions.

To make sure people do feel as comfortable as possible, most sexual health clinics can provide a choice of male or female staff for consultations. Some services also hold separate sessions for men, women, young people, gay men, trans and lesbians.

Regardless of age, ethnic group, or sexual orientation, everyone is entitled to confidential information and advice. The only time a doctor or other health professional would have to disclose any information to anyone else is where they are concerned about their patient's safety or the safety of anyone else. No-one should ever be judged because of their sexual behaviour or practices, and staff should always treat people in a respectful and non-judgemental way.

If you have symptoms you will then have a visual inspection, where a sexual health nurse or doctor will look at your sexual bits to make sure there are no obvious rashes, warts, sores, or other problems. If you have a vagina then a few painless swabs will be taken from the inside walls of the vagina and from the head of the cervix, and if you have a penis you will have to pee in a pot and have a small, painless swab taken from the head of the penis. In some cases, anal swabs may be done. Blood may be taken to test for HIV.

You will only need to have an examination if you have symptoms – otherwise you can do the samples yourself (for example a urine sample if you have a penis; a vaginal swab if you have a vagina).

The whole procedure is painless, and is done in a supportive, welcoming, open environment. You can ask any questions that you have, and you will know that anything you say or do will remain completely confidential.

Many schools, clubs, sports organisations, outreach centres, youth clubs, colleges, GP practices, pharmacies, and midwives also offer free 'do it yourself' Chlamydia & Gonorrhoea testing. To order a home testing kit please email SC-TR.BrightonCASH@nhs.net

STI Treatment

It is a really good idea to test for Sexually Transmitted Infections regularly. This means that you are looking after your sexual health. The sooner infections are picked up, the sooner they can be treated and the less likely they are to lead to more serious complications. It is a good idea to have a STI check up every six months or every time you change partners.

If you have been tested and have been given a positive result (meaning that you do have a Sexually Transmitted Infection) it is important to get treated as soon as you can.

Lots of people find getting a positive result is a bit of a shock but there is no reason to panic. Health Professionals at Sexual Health clinics or your own doctor/GP will help you get the right treatment. They will be able to talk through any worries that you may have and answer any questions.

Chlamydia

If you have a positive Chlamydia test result (meaning that you do have the infection) you can be treated with antibiotics. They can clear the infection in 7 days as long as you don't have any sexual contact as you may become re-infected in this time. If you are sick within 3 hours of taking the tablets you need to go and get treated again, as they might not have had time to work properly. When a health professional tells you that you have the Chlamydia Infection they will tell you where you need to go for treatment and arrange this for you. Someone will usually call you a week after you have had treatment to make sure that everything went ok and that you are feeling alright about everything.

If a sexual partner (somebody that you have had sex with) has had a positive Chlamydia test result, it is very likely that you will have the infection. You will be offered treatment before your test results are back, to make sure that the infection is treated as soon as possible.

Gonorrhoea

If you have a positive Gonorrhoea test result (meaning that you do have the Gonorrhoea Infection) you can be treated with antibiotics. This is usually either antibiotic tablets or a single antibiotic injection. When you are contacted with a positive result the health professional will tell you where you need to go for treatment and arrange this for you.

If a sexual partner has had a positive Gonorrhoea test result, it is very likely that you will have the infection. You will be offered treatment before your test results are back, to make sure the infection is treated as soon as possible.

Bacterial STIs

Chlamydia and Gonorrhoea are bacterial infections and can be treated with antibiotics. Other STIs that can be treated with antibiotics are Non-Specific Urethritis, Syphilis and Trichomonas Vaginalis. If you have any of these infections, a Health Professional will tell you what treatment you need and where to go, when they give you your sexual health test results.

Viral STIs

Some STIs are viruses. Viruses cannot be cured but can be treated. Some viruses such as Herpes and the Genital Wart virus can hang around in your body without causing you any problems most of the time, but you may experience times where you get genital warts (fleshy lumps) or Herpes sores (painful ulcers). Sexual Health Professionals can treat the symptoms of these STIs when they appear. If you think you have one of these Infections it is very important to have a sexual health check by visiting one of the services listed.

HIV and Hepatitis are viral infections, which can lead to more serious health problems. Undiagnosed and untreated HIV can lead to AIDS, an immuno-deficiency disease. Hepatitis can lead to liver disease. If you do have either of these viruses, your health professional will work closely with you to treat and manage your symptoms throughout the course of your life. There are many different support systems and treatment options for people who do acquire these illnesses, and there are often more treatment options when the disease is caught early. So regular testing is really important.

Parasitic STIs

Some STIs are actually tiny parasitic insects or mites that live in the genital area, skin or pubic hair. These include scabies and pubic lice. Although these are an itchy nuisance, treatment is usually simple and effective. If you think you may have scabies or public lice it is important to get a sexual health check.

Other common problems

There are some really common conditions that affect the genital area, such as Thrush and Bacterial Vaginosis. Bacterial Vaginosis, affects people with a vagina only and cannot be spread through sex. Thrush can be spread between partners, but is not actually an STI. Wearing tight clothing around the genitals, or using perfumed products that destroy the natural 'healthy' bacteria that live in the genital area, are just some of the many causes that can lead to both conditions. Cystitis is an inflammation of the urethra, which can be caused by the friction of having sex as well as the bacteria that can be around the genitals when you have sex, although it cannot be passed on from one person to another during sex.

Thrush is usually treated with antifungal pills or pessaries and Bacterial Vaginosis is usually treated with antibiotic pills. Sometimes Cystitis can be cleared up with treatments that you can buy from a pharmacy but if it is painful or you are unsure that you have cystitis, it is a good idea to see your doctor, who will give you antibiotics if you need them.

Finally...

Although finding out that you have an STI can be scary or worrying, it is unlikely to go away without treatment, and you could pass it on to anyone else that you have sex with. You should always get tested if you think that you are at risk as some STIs have no symptoms or may seem to "clear up" for a while after the first signs or symptoms appear. If you have an STI, always make sure that treatment has worked before having sex again so that you don't pass it on to your sexual partner.