

Preventing Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs, STDs)

'An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure' was an expression coined by Benjamin Franklin. This is so true for STDs. **It is very smart to be educated about STD and pregnancy prevention.** Sex can be fun, and is part of our body functioning, but it can also have catastrophic consequences, especially in women, if safety parameters are ignored.

STD prevention can be grouped in 3 categories: steps to be taken before sexual intercourse, during sex and afterwards.

Before sexual intercourse (Pre-exposure)

1. **Abstinence and/or reduction in sex partners.** The most reliable way to avoid transmission of STDs is to **abstain** from oral, vaginal, and anal sex or to be in a long-term, **mutually monogamous** relationship with a partner known to be uninfected.
2. Pre-exposure **vaccination** is one of the most effective methods for preventing transmission of HPV (human papillomavirus), Hepatitis A and B.
3. **Male circumcision** reduces the risk for HIV and some STDs (such as HPV and herpes) transmission in heterosexual men.

During sexual intercourse

1. **Condoms.** When male latex condoms are used **consistently and correctly**, they are highly effective in preventing the sexual transmission of HIV, HPV, Hepatitis B, syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomoniasis and pelvic inflammatory disease (PID).

Rate of condom breakage during sexual intercourse and withdrawal is approximately two broken condoms per 100 condoms. The failure of condoms to protect against STD or unintended pregnancy usually results from inconsistent or incorrect use rather than condom breakage.

Female condoms can provide protection from acquisition and transmission of STDs. Cervical diaphragms and spermicidal agents such as N-9 are not protective. N-9 can actually increase the risk of urinary tract infection and HIV transmission.

2. If possible, **avoid anal sex.** The anus lacks the natural lubrication and a thick coating layer that the vagina has, so it is more prone to tearing and the spread of STD's. The anus is full of bacteria, like E. Coli, that can spread to the bladder, causing infections. It may also weaken the anal sphincter, a ring-like muscle designed to hold feces. If still willing to do it, the use of condoms and lubrication is highly recommended.
3. Be careful with **oral sex.** It has been linked to throat cancer (HPV). Most STD's can still be transmitted though oral sex. The use of penile condoms or 'dental dams' over the vulva and/or anus is recommended.

After Sexual intercourse (Post-exposure)

1. Get tested! The Public Health Agency of Canada recommends STD's screening (testing) in all sexually active women under the age of 25. Yearly testing is adequate if you are in a monogamous relationship. STD's can be present for a long time before women have any symptoms. If it is caught early, the treatment can eradicate the STD before it can cause any harm.

STDs are detected with vaginal swabs and blood tests. STDs that are tested for with vaginal swabs include chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomonas and bacterial vaginosis. The swabs can be taken by the doctor or patient. Urine testing is not as good in women as it is in men.

STD's that are established with a blood test include HIV (AIDS), syphilis and hepatitis. Please note that there is no spot test for human papilloma virus (HPV) (the pap test may indirectly show it), or genital herpes (unless there is a lesion)

2. Evaluation and treatment of infected partners. Testing of the sexual partner is highly recommended, but in some cases treatment without testing is available to decrease the spread of STDs.

2. Refrain from intercourse for at least 7 days after completion of any STD treatment.

3. HIV. After having a sexual encounter with an HIV positive person, there are medications available that can be taken orally to reduce the chance of getting it.

4. Retesting After Treatment. Any person who tests positive for chlamydia, gonorrhea or trichomonas, should be retested 3-6 months afterwards to confirm cure.

5. Reporting to Public Health. The accurate and timely reporting of STDs is integral to public health efforts to assess trends, allocate resources, and assist local health authorities in partner notification and treatment. HIV, syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia and trichomonas are reportable diseases. Public health professionals will contact the positive patient to verify the diagnosis and determine that treatments are provided accurately. Contacts can be traced to diminish the risk of spreading.

You should do your best to prevent STDS and unplanned pregnancies. Be smart!

Dr Roberto Leon