

## **STDs - HOW TO GET TESTED**

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), also known as sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a group of infections that have 1 factor in common: **they can be transmitted through any type of sexual contact with an infected individual**. The most common types that come to a gynecologist office are described here. STDs such as HIV (AIDS), syphilis, Hepatitis B and C are likely to present to other health care providers, as their most common complaints are usually non-gynecological, and won't be discussed here.

A survey in the USA shows that **almost a quarter of female adolescents aged 14 to 25 years of age had laboratory evidence of at least one of the following STDs:**

- o Human papillomavirus (HPV, 18 percent),
- o Chlamydia trachomatis (4 percent),
- o Trichomonas vaginalis (3 percent),
- o Herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2, 2 percent),
- o Neisseria gonorrhoea (1 percent).

Repeated infections with STDs are common: As many as 40 % of chlamydial or gonococcal infections occur in adolescents previously infected. Some risk factors for acquiring an STD include:

**o Age less than 25 years**

- o Multiple partners.
- o New partner(s).
- o Partner with multiple other partners.
- o Inconsistent use of condoms (not every time)
- o A partner with symptoms (i.e.: penile discharge)

**The Public Health Agency of Canada advocates STD's testing all sexually active women under the age of 25.** Yearly testing is recommended even if you are in a monogamous relationship. The majority of STD's can be present for a long time before any symptoms appear. If they are caught early, the treatment can eradicate STDs before they cause harm.

The most common gynecological symptoms of STDs are:

1. **Vaginal discharge** is the most common presentation of bacterial vaginosis and candidiasis, but less commonly it can be due to gonorrhoea, chlamydia, genital herpes and trichomoniasis. The characteristics of the discharge, such as color (clear, mucoid, yellow, green), pain or itching, smell or amount are not great indicators of the cause of it. Self-medication is not appropriate. It is important to identify the organism responsible for the discharge by obtaining vaginal swabs.

2. **Genital ulcers:** genital herpes (HSV) is the most common cause of genital ulcers among adolescents. Symptomatic genital herpes may be caused by herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 in addition to the more common HSV type 2, and the proportion of cases caused by the former appears to be increasing. Syphilis can also present with an ulcer, but it is usually not painful and can go unnoticed. Of note, genital ulcers are not always due to an STD, but can be associated with other viral illness and medical conditions such as Crohn's disease.

3. **Pelvic Pain** can be caused by pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), usually initiated by chlamydia and gonorrhea. However, there are many causes of pelvic pain in young women, such as endometriosis, ovarian cysts and others.

4. **Skin conditions.** The most common presentation is genital warts due to HPV. They are often cauliflower type lesions, but other skin conditions can look similar, such as skin tags and VIN (vulvar intraepithelial neoplasia), which is a precancerous condition.

**It is important to emphasize again that the majority of women with STDs DO NOT HAVE ANY SYMPTOMS.** For most STDs, there is a window of opportunity where the detection and prompt treatment can avoid long term consequences.

**STD's can be detected with vaginal swabs, blood tests, and urine (the latter not**

#### **STD's (AND VAGINAL INFECTIONS) THAT ARE DETECTED WITH VAGINAL SWABS**

1. **Chlamydia**
2. **Gonorrhea**
3. **Trichomonas**
4. **Bacterial Vaginosis** (may or may not be an STD)
5. **Yeasts** (rarely can be sexually transmitted)

NOTE: Advances in the laboratory for identification of STD's from the vaginal walls has allowed the development of **self-swabbing** (as supposed to the physician or nurse doing it). We call the test "**selfie**", as we have a protocol that follows if you call and ask for it. Self-swabbing can also be done to find out the cause of vaginal discharge or infections (**vaginitis**), before you take any over the counter treatment, or to confirm that the infection is cleared after treatment.

#### **STDs THAT ARE DETECTED FOR WITH BLOOD TESTS**

1. **HIV/AIDS**
2. **Syphilis**
3. **Hepatitis B and C**

#### **STDs FOR WHICH THERE ARE INDIRECT TESTS, OR ONLY AVAILABLE IN SPECIAL SITUATIONS**

1. **Human Papilloma Virus – HPV.** There are swabs available, but considered experimental still.
2. **Genital Herpes:** there are blood tests available but they are not very helpful. Swabs can only be useful if taken from an ulcer or an open lesion.

**recommended, as the detection rate is lower than the vaginal swabs)**

It is important to prevent or use protection against STDs. But if it happens, early testing and treatment is also appropriate. Be smart, do your best to prevent it, or get tested early!

*Dr Roberto Leon*