

Sexual Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is one of the more common sexually transmitted infections and is easily passed on during sex.

It is caused by bacteria that live in warm, moist parts of the body such as the throat, rectum and penis.

It's also in infected semen.

Symptoms

Symptoms in men usually show within 10 days.

Gonorrhoea in the penis often causes a yellowish/white discharge and a burning feeling, especially when urinating.

Gonorrhoea in the throat sometimes causes a sore throat but it is mostly symptom-free. With gonorrhoea in the rectum there are often no symptoms but there might be discomfort and discharge.

How it's passed on

Gonorrhoea is spread among men during oral or anal sex without condoms.

It can also spread on fingers when you touch an infected part of the body then touch other parts of your or someone else's body.

Using a condom cuts the risk.

If you have HIV, having untreated gonorrhoea makes it more likely that you'll pass on HIV during unprotected sex.

Tests and treatment

There is a urine test for gonorrhoea, or a sample is taken from the infected part of your body using a swab (small cotton bud). Swabs taken from the rectum and throat don't hurt – a swab taken from the inside tip of your penis can be uncomfortable for a second or two.

Gonorrhoea is usually treated with a one-off dose of antibiotics. People you've had sex with also need to get checked - a clinic can contact them if you don't want to. Left untreated, gonorrhoea can cause serious problems.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of infections such as gonorrhoea. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea - especially if you are starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most common sexually transmitted infection and it's easily passed on during sex.

It is caused by bacteria that live in warm, moist parts of the body. For men this is usually in the penis but sometimes in the throat or rectum.

It's also in infected semen.

Symptoms

Symptoms might show within one to three weeks of infection, but around half of those infected have no symptoms.

Chlamydia in the penis can cause a whitish discharge and a burning feeling, especially when urinating.

Chlamydia in the throat is usually symptom-free.

In the rectum it usually causes no symptoms but might cause discomfort and discharge.

How it's passed on

Among men, Chlamydia is spread during oral or anal sex without condoms. It can also spread on fingers when you touch an infected part of the body then touch other parts of your or another man's body.

Using a condom cuts the risk.

If you have HIV, having untreated Chlamydia makes it more likely that you'll pass on HIV during unprotected sex.

Tests and treatment

There's a urine test for Chlamydia, or a sample is taken from the infected part of your body using a swab (small cotton bud). Swabs taken from the rectum and throat don't hurt – a swab taken from the inside tip of your penis is uncomfortable for a second or two.

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics. Don't have sex until treatment has finished or you could pass on the infection. People you've had sex with also need to get checked - a clinic can contact them if you don't want to. Untreated Chlamydia sometimes causes serious problems.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of infections like Chlamydia. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

Herpes

Herpes is caused by a virus that enters the body through the delicate, moist skin of the lips, throat, penis and rectum.

It stays inactive in nerve endings deep under the skin, only causing symptoms if it becomes active.

Symptoms

Blisters are the main symptom. After getting infected you may never get blisters, get them once or they may come back now and again - usually they are less painful and frequent over time.

You may see signs of infection within two weeks; but sometimes it can be months - maybe years - after getting infected before symptoms first appear. You may not notice when symptoms are mild, such as red or itchy skin, a rash or break in the skin or small bump.

A herpes blister can appear in or around the mouth (known as 'cold sores'), throat, penis or rectum; sometimes they may appear on thighs, buttocks and other areas too. You may feel tired, with flu-like aches and swollen glands, usually worse the first time blisters appear.

Skin may itch, tingle or go red before blisters start. They can be painful, especially when going to the toilet, and might cause discharge from the penis or rectum. Blisters hold an infectious clear liquid before they burst, scab over and heal within two to four weeks.

How it's passed on

Among men, herpes is passed on through skin-to-skin contact during anal or oral sex without condoms.

Infection is more likely when blisters are on the skin but sometimes happens with no blisters present. You won't see blisters inside the throat or rectum. If you kiss or have oral sex with 'cold sores' on your mouth, you risk giving your partner herpes on their lips or genitals.

A person is infectious from when they feel a blister starting until the scab heals. Condoms cut the risk of getting or passing on herpes if they cover the affected area.

Wash hands after touching blisters, especially before handling contact lenses. Avoid things that trigger them, such as lack of sleep, sunbathing or stress.

Having herpes makes it easier for someone to get or pass on HIV.

Tests and treatment

A herpes blood test exists but it isn't used often because most adults already have the virus without it causing them any problems. Clinics will test blisters for the virus and treat symptoms.

The virus stays in the body for life but anti-viral creams or tablets stop blisters or make them heal more quickly, and can be used long term to prevent symptoms. If blisters appear, pain-killing creams and bathing in salt water may help.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of infections such as herpes. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner

Hepatitis

Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. This can be caused by a range of factors, including your lifestyle – drinking alcohol can cause it, for example.

Several viruses can also cause hepatitis. On this website we cover hepatitis A,B and C.

'Co-infection' with hepatitis B virus and hepatitis C virus is increasingly becoming a major cause of illness in people with HIV. Both these viruses affect the liver, can make you very ill and can – in some cases – be fatal.

But there are treatments, and these can work well in people with HIV.

Non-Specific urethritis (NSU)

Non-specific urethritis (NSU) is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections in men.

'Urethritis' means 'inflammation of the urethra' (the tube inside the penis that urine comes down). 'Non-specific' means the exact cause of the inflammation isn't known, but it is caused by bacteria (often Chlamydia) picked up during sex from a partner's mouth, rectum or penis.

Sometimes doctors refer to it as non-gonococcal urethritis or NGU.

Symptoms

There may be no symptoms but up to three weeks after becoming infected you might get a whiteish discharge from your penis.

You might also feel an itching or burning inside your penis, especially when urinating.

How it's passed on

Bacteria are usually the cause of NSU. They live inside a man's mouth, penis or rectum and get into his partner's penis when they have unprotected oral or anal sex. He might also carry the bacteria on his fingers to his penis after touching an infected part of his own or someone else's body.

Using condoms cuts the risk of NSU. Sometimes NSU is inflammation caused by friction from masturbation and sex, or even a reaction to things like soap.

If a man has HIV, having untreated NSU makes it more likely he'll pass on HIV during unprotected sex.

Tests and treatment

There's a urine test for NSU or a sample is taken from the opening of your penis using a swab (small cotton bud). This might be uncomfortable for a second or two.

A course of antibiotics will cure NSU. Sex should be avoided until treatment has finished, to avoid passing on NSU. Sexual partners also need to be checked - a clinic can contact them anonymously. Untreated NSU sometimes causes serious problems such as arthritis.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of infections like NSU. You can have them without knowing so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if you are starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

Syphilis

Syphilis spreads easily and is caused by bacteria that live in warm, moist parts of the body like the mouth, penis or rectum.

Symptoms

The infection has three stages:

- First stage (primary syphilis) – two to four weeks after becoming infected a painless sore ('chancere') may appear on your penis, in your mouth or rectum. This heals over. Glands near the sore may swell.
- Second stage (secondary syphilis) – a few weeks or months later you may get a rash on your body, often on the palms of your hands or soles of your feet. You might feel ill, with a fever or headache. You may get ulcers, grey patches or growths of skin on or around your mouth or genitals.
- Third or late stage (tertiary syphilis) – years later syphilis can seriously damage your heart, brain and nervous system. The infection is usually detected by then.

There may be no symptoms but up to three weeks after becoming infected you might get a whiteish discharge from your penis.

You might also feel an itching or burning inside your penis, especially when urinating.

How it's passed on

Syphilis bacteria spread during unprotected oral or anal sex through contact with the sores of the first stage or the rash of the second stage. Unless they are treated, someone can pass syphilis on for up to two years.

Using a condom cuts the risk, but only if the condom covers the sores or rash. Avoid touching sores or the rash.

Having syphilis makes it easier for someone to contract or pass on HIV.

Tests and treatment

There is a blood test for syphilis, and if you have a sore its fluid will also be tested. Antibiotics, given by injection or tablets, cure it but don't have sex until treatment has finished or you could pass on the infection. People you've had sex with also need to get checked - a clinic can do this if you don't want to. Untreated syphilis can cause serious heart, brain and nerve problems years later.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of contracting infections like syphilis. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

Genital warts

Genital warts are one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. They are caused by a virus (human papillomavirus - HPV) that lives in the skin. Although it stays there for several years, it doesn't mean that you'll keep getting warts.

Symptoms

A number of weeks or months after picking up the virus, one or several growths the size of a pin head might appear. Warts usually grow on the head of the penis, or in or around the rectum.

They might itch or bleed and if left untreated they can grow bigger and spread.

How it's passed on

During sex the virus is passed on when someone's skin touches another person's warts (which you won't see if they're inside his rectum).

Sometimes the virus is passed on without any warts being present.

Using a condom cuts the risk but only if the condom covers the skin where the wart virus is.

Tests and treatment

Genital warts must be treated by a doctor – treatments for warts on the hand cannot be used. The sooner warts are treated, the easier it is to get rid of them.

Warts can be frozen off with liquid nitrogen, or a special kind of cream or acid can be put on them at a clinic or at home. Laser treatment and surgery can be used on hard-to-treat cases.

It can take several treatments to get rid of warts and they might come back. Don't have sex until treatment has finished or you could pass on the infection.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance of infections like warts. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.

Pubic Lice

Pubic lice – often called 'crabs' – are very common. They are small crab-shaped insects the size of a pin head when fully grown.

They're easy to get and live on body hair, feeding on blood (but they cannot pass on HIV).

They live on pubic hair, underarm hair, hairy legs and chests and sometimes in eyebrows or facial hair - but not in hair on the head.

Symptoms

It is possible to have pubic lice without noticing but two to three weeks after getting them they will usually make you itch, especially at night.

You might see a rash. If you have just been infected you probably won't see them but as they grow they often become visible.

How they are passed on

Pubic lice are passed on by body contact during sex. However if someone becomes infected it doesn't always mean they've had sex with someone else, as lice can spread on towels, clothes and bedding (although this isn't common).

Unfortunately there is no way of stopping yourself getting pubic lice. If you get them, you can stop them spreading to others by washing bedding, towels and clothes on a hot wash (which will kill the lice and their eggs) and making sure anyone who's shared your bed, towels or clothes is treated.

Leather clothing can be dry cleaned or left in a plastic bag for two weeks.

Tests and treatment

You don't need to go to a clinic or see a doctor. You can treat yourself at home with creams bought without a prescription from the chemist.

You put the lotion over your whole body (except head and face) and leave it on for 24 hours. If it doesn't work ask a clinic for advice.

Shaving off pubic hair will not get rid of the lice.

LGV

LGV stands for 'lymphogranuloma venereum', a type of chlamydia bacteria that attack the lymph nodes.

Symptoms

Nearly all LGV infections have been in the rectum. Within a few weeks of becoming infected most people get painful inflammation in the rectum (known as 'proctitis') with bleeding, pus, constipation, ulcers or abscesses. They can also get a fever and feel unwell.

A small sore might appear where the bacteria got into the body but most people don't get or notice one. Left untreated LGV can cause lasting damage in the rectum that may require surgery.

LGV in the penis might cause a discharge and pain when urinating, with swollen glands in the groin.

LGV in the mouth or throat is rare but it can cause swollen glands in the neck.

How it's passed on

LGV bacteria usually enter the body through the delicate, moist skin of the rectum and penis. Infection through the mouth and throat is possible but rare.

Gay and bisexual men have contracted LGV from having anal sex without condoms and from fisting.

The bacteria can also be carried during group sex from one rectum to another on objects such as sex toys, fingers, enema equipment, condoms or latex gloves.

Cover anything going from one rectum to another with a fresh condom for each new person it enters, or clean it with warm water and anti-bacterial soap. A fresh latex glove should be used for each new person being fisted. Enema equipment should not be shared.

Having LGV makes it easier for you to get or pass on HIV.

Tests and treatment

If you have possible LGV symptoms, a sexual health clinic will use a swab (a small cotton bud) to take a sample from your rectum and penis. This is initially tested for Chlamydia. If it tests 'positive' it is then also tested for LGV.

Antibiotics cure LGV with no lasting affects, as long as the infection is treated early enough. Don't have sex until treatment has finished or you could pass on the infection.

People you've had sex with also need to get checked - a clinic can do this for you if you don't want to. If you have had LGV once you can get it again.

The more people you have sex with, especially unprotected sex, the more chance you have of contracting infections such as LGV. You can have them without knowing, so regular check-ups are a good idea, especially if starting a new relationship and/or you want to stop using condoms with your partner.