

What are sexually transmitted infections?

A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection you get or give during sexual activity.

STIs can be caused by viruses (e.g., human immunodeficiency virus, herpes), bacteria (e.g., gonorrhoea, syphilis) or parasites (e.g., pubic lice).

Common sexually transmitted infections include¹:

- Chlamydia
- Genital warts
- Gonorrhoea
- Hepatitis A, B
- Herpes
- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)
- Mycoplasma genitalium
- Pubic lice
- Syphilis.

Less common or rare STIs include¹.

- Chancroid
- Donovanosis
- Hepatitis C (more common in men who have sex with men compared with those who don't)
- Lymphogranuloma venereum (more common in men who have sex with men compared with those who don't)
- Trichomoniasis.

The prevalence of all STIs is not known because the infections aren't always diagnosed.

In 2017, there were more than 84,000 cases of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, hepatitis or syphilis among Australian men, accounting for 56% of all cases².

STI rates are higher in men aged in their 20s and 30s than in other age groups².

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males have higher rates of chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis than non-Indigenous males³.

Depending on the STI, rates vary between 1 in 14,000 Australian men (for HIV) to 1 in 250 (for chlamydia)².

The rates of some STIs (e.g. gonorrhoea and syphilis) have tripled in the last 10 years².

Symptoms of STIs

The symptoms of STIs depend on the bacteria, virus or parasite that cause them.

Common STI symptoms include:

- Skin irritation or rash
- Itching
- Pain in your lower abdomen or genitals
- A burning sensation when you urinate
- Discharge from your penis or anus.

Some STIs don't have any symptoms, so you may not know you have one and might pass it on to someone else without knowing.

Causes of STIs

STIs are caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites that are transmitted during oral, anal or vaginal sex, or simply by skin to skin contact.

Diagnosis of STIs

To diagnose an STI, your doctor will ask about your sexual history and practices, examine you, and order tests to look for bacteria and viruses.

Treatment of STIs

The treatment for STIs depends on what causes them. Usual treatments include antibiotics, antiviral medications and creams.

Health effects of STIs

Apart from the short-term effects, STIs can cause permanent damage to your [reproductive system](#) and affect your ability to have children. Some STIs can have lifelong effects on your health or require you to take medications for the rest of your life.

What to do about STIs

The best way to deal with STIs is to practise safe sex so you avoid infection in the first place.

Practising safe sex, especially with new partners, can help to prevent the transmission of STIs. Safe sex practices include:

- Proper use of condoms when you have anal, oral or vaginal sex
- Avoiding contact with any sores or rashes
- Talking with your sexual partner(s) about your sexual history and health, and about theirs.

If you're sexually active and have new or different partners, you should have a sexual health check every three months. If you're in a long-term sexual relationship, you should have a sexual health check at least once a year.

If you have symptoms of an STI, see your doctor straight away. You should avoid sexual contact with someone else in case you give the infection to them. You should also speak to your sexual partner(s) to let them know you might have an STI so they can arrange to see their doctor.

What questions should I ask my doctor about STIs?

- Could my symptoms be caused by a sexually transmitted infection?
- How can I avoid getting an STI?
- How can I find out if my STI will have a lasting effect on my health or fertility?
- Will my STI come back?

References

[1] <http://www.sti.guidelines.org.au/>

[2] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2019. The health of Australia's males. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/men-women/male-health/contents/how-healthy/sexual-health>

(30 August 2021)

[3] <https://data.kirby.unsw.edu.au/STIs> (30 August 2021)

[4] <https://playsafe.health.nsw.gov.au/2021/08/19/the-dos-and-donts-of-condoms/> (30 August 2021)

[5] au.reachout.com/articles/how-to-get-a-sexual-health-check (30 August 2021)

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