Sexually transmitted infections how to prevent them, and where to go for help
This booklet is an introduction to sexually transmitted infections, how to prevent them and where to go for help. It gives you up-to-date information and advice on a wide range of topics, including:

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What are sexually transmitted infections?
During sexual contact infections can be passed from one person to another. These are known as sexually transmitted infections (or sexually transmitted diseases). Anyone who is having sex can get a sexually transmitted infection from an infected partner if they do not use any protection.

It is important to realise that:
- Many sexually transmitted infections have no obvious symptoms of illness, so you could have an infection and not know it.
- Sexually transmitted infections occur frequently in both men and women.
- Many sexually transmitted infections are curable and all are preventable.
- Delaying treatment could mean that the infection gets worse and other problems could occur.
- A mother can pass on an untreated infection to her child during pregnancy and birth.
Types of sexually transmitted infections

There are many types of sexually transmitted infection:

Common
- Genital warts
- Chlamydia
- Non-specific urethritis (NSU)
- Genital herpes
- Gonorrhoea (or the clap)

Less common
- Trichomonas vaginalis (TV)
- Syphilis (the pox)
- HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)
- Hepatitis B and C
- Infestations, including scabies and pubic lice (crabs)

Some of these infections are very serious. For example, HIV is the virus which causes AIDS. Hepatitis B can cause liver problems such as cirrhosis (scarring) or liver cancer. Syphilis can cause permanent damage to the heart, brain and nervous system if left untreated.

Other infections are occasionally, but not always, spread through sexual contact. These include thrush, bacterial vaginosis and cystitis.
How are these infections spread?
Sexually transmitted infections are usually spread when infected blood, semen or vaginal fluid come into contact with another person during sex. But some infections (such as HIV and hepatitis B and C) can be spread through infected blood, when needles and other injecting equipment are shared.

Different infections can be passed on to either partner through different sexual activities:

- Chlamydia, NSU, gonorrhoea, hepatitis B and HIV infections are usually spread through penetrative vaginal, anal or oral sex (when the penis enters the vagina, anus or mouth).

- TV is spread by vaginal sex, and though men may carry it, they usually do not have any symptoms. It can be passed on by sex between women if fluid from the vagina is exchanged – by sharing sex toys, for example.

- Genital warts, herpes and syphilis can be spread through body contact between partners’ genital areas. Because these infections can occur on or in the mouth, they can also be spread by oral sex when someone uses their mouth or tongue to stimulate their partner’s genitals.

- Scabies, crabs and other infestations can be spread by any of these sexual practices and also by skin contact.
Safer sex

Safer sex is about reducing the risk of sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, for you and your partner. It is basically sex that prevents an infected person’s blood, semen or fluid from the vagina getting inside their partner's body.

Safer sex with condoms

• Used properly, condoms provide a very effective barrier against most sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Check the pack for instructions on their correct use.
• It’s important to always use a good quality condom with the European CE mark or the CE and British Kitemark.
• Most condoms are already lubricated, but some people find using extra lubricant can improve sex and help prevent the condom tearing. Only use water-based lubricants (such as KY jelly, Clinigel, Sensel or Boots lubricating jelly).
• For anal sex always use plenty of water-based lubricant to help prevent tearing.
• For oral sex, if the penis is being stimulated, consider using a condom. Some people use a dental dam for oral sex with a woman. A dental dam is a thin latex square held over the genital area to create a barrier between the genital area (or anus) and the mouth.

Never use oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline, baby oil, hand cream, margarine, body lotions or massage oil. They will damage the condom and make it unsafe.
Condom talk

How do you suggest using a condom with a partner? Once you have decided to have sex, the earlier you discuss it, the less likely you are to get carried away and end up not using any protection.

Try to steer the conversation around to safer sex. You can then let your partner know what you think and see how they feel too. You could be pleasantly surprised. Your partner may find it just as difficult and would welcome the lead.

If you are worried about introducing the subject, why not try asking: “Your condoms or mine?”

It’s a good idea to carry your own condoms. Being prepared doesn’t mean planning to sleep around – it is a responsible thing to do and shows you take your sexual health seriously.

Safer sex with sex toys

- Put a condom over toys such as dildos or vibrators if you are both going to use them. Wash the sex toy and put on a new condom for each partner and activity. Do not use the same sex toy for vaginal sex after using it in the anal area, as you could transfer bacteria which may cause a vaginal infection.
- Kissing, stroking and masturbation usually carry no risk of infection.
How do I know if I have a sexually transmitted infection?

People who have a sexually transmitted infection sometimes get symptoms to show that something is wrong. But often they don’t.

Some warning signs to look for are:

- An unusually thick or watery, cloudy or smelly discharge from the vagina (not to be confused with the normal slight discharge which all women have).
- A discharge from the penis.
- Itching, rashes, sores, blisters or pain in the genital area.
- A pain or burning sensation when you pass urine.
- Urinating more than usual.
- Pain during sex.

But remember:

- Sometimes there are no symptoms.
- Symptoms may not appear for months.
- Symptoms may disappear when there is still infection.
- You can have more than one sexually transmitted infection at a time.

Untreated sexually transmitted infections can cause serious and permanent damage. Get yourself checked out straight away if you have any of the symptoms listed above or if you think your current or a recent partner has an infection.

Go to your own GP or any NHS sexual health clinic, often called STD (sexually transmitted disease) or GUM (genito-urinary medicine) clinic (see ‘Where do I go for help?’ on p.10).
What if I don’t have treatment?
Some sexually transmitted infections can cause permanent damage to your health if left untreated. They can cause:

**In women**
- Pelvic pain which may recur throughout life.
- Damage to the fallopian tubes (the tubes which carry the eggs from your ovaries to your womb). This may lead to an ectopic pregnancy, when the fertilised egg begins to grow in the fallopian tube or outside it, rather than in the womb.
- Infertility.

**In men**
- Inflammation (pain and swelling) of the testes.
- Inflammation of joints and eyes.
  (Women may also experience this.)
- Reduced fertility.

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HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the most serious sexually transmitted infection. It damages the body’s defence system so that it cannot fight off some infections.

Most people who have HIV look and feel healthy for a long time, sometimes for ten years or more. They may not know they have the virus. However, they can pass it on to other people through semen, blood and vaginal fluids.

If you have another untreated sexually transmitted infection, you increase the risk of getting HIV or passing HIV to your partner.

When someone with HIV goes on to get certain illnesses, this condition is called AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome). New treatments have been developed which mean that most people can stay well for longer although these don’t suit everybody.
Where do I go for help?

If you think that you might have a sexually transmitted infection you should go to an NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic. These clinics offer free check-ups and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. They also do HIV testing. All information is kept strictly confidential. You can go to any clinic, anywhere in the country. You don’t have to use a local one and you don’t have to be referred by your GP.

You can find details of your nearest NHS sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted disease (STD) or venereal disease (VD). Or you could ring the National AIDS Helpline free on 0800 567 123 for details of local clinics, or phone your local hospital and ask for the ‘special’ or GUM clinic. (Non-NHS sexual health clinics do not always offer the full range of services which are available at NHS sexual health clinics.)

Some sexual health clinics offer men-only and women-only sessions and some offer sessions for gay and bisexual men and women. (Ring the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard or the National AIDS Helpline – details on the back cover.)

What happens at the clinic?

When you arrive, the receptionist will ask you to complete a registration form. You may then be given a card with a personal identification number to retain your anonymity.

You will be seen by a nurse, health adviser or doctor, who will ask you some questions about your general and sexual health. These include questions about your sexual activities and whether they were with a man, a woman or both. You may find these questions embarrassing but it is important that you answer them honestly to help staff find out which tests you need.
What tests are available?

- Once you have discussed your worries, the doctor decides what type of examination and tests you need.

A full sexual health check includes:

- An examination of your genitals and sometimes the lower part of your body, your mouth and skin.
- Taking a few swabs. A swab is a type of cotton bud used to pick up samples of any discharge or secretions from your genital region.
- A urine sample.
- A blood test for syphilis (offered to all patients).

You may also be offered:

- An HIV test. This will only be done if you specifically agree to it.
- A cervical smear test (if you are a woman).
- Blood tests for hepatitis B or C.

You may get some of your test results straight away. But other results take longer, and you must phone or call in to collect them. If your results show that you have an infection, you will be given treatment immediately.

If you are given antibiotics to take away, it is important that you finish the course – even if the symptoms go away before the tablets are finished. Do not share your treatment with partners or friends.

The clinic may advise you to contact any recent partners and ask them to attend for a check-up. If this is difficult for you, help is at hand (see 'What do I say to my partner?' on p.13).
Can I still have sex?

It is better not to have penetrative sex until you have been given the all-clear. If you want to have sex while you or your partner has a sexually transmitted infection, ask your doctor or the clinic for advice. For some infections, for example genital warts, you may be advised to use a condom. If either of you have cold sores, don’t kiss each other, particularly around the genital area, as this can pass on the infection.

An infection, such as herpes, which cannot be cured and is infectious during and possibly between outbreaks, doesn’t mean the end of your sex life. Get advice from your doctor or clinic about how to make sex safer for you and your partner.

What if I am pregnant?

If a woman has a sexually transmitted infection during pregnancy, this could infect her baby either in the womb or during birth. However, most sexually transmitted infections can be treated during pregnancy without harming the mother or baby. Some infections, such as genital warts, can become worse during pregnancy.

During ante-natal care, tests for sexually transmitted infections are sometimes done to avoid possible ill-effects during pregnancy. These are not routine practice, but in some clinics where HIV is more common in the local population, HIV testing may be offered to all pregnant women.

Sexually transmitted infections during pregnancy can cause, among other things, miscarriage, abnormalities, eye infections, and lumps in the throat or genitals of the baby. It is also possible to pass on infections such as HIV and hepatitis B to the baby.
What do I say to my partner?

When you have a sexually transmitted infection, it is important to tell your sexual partner so that they can have a sexual health check up too. If your partner also has the infection and does not get treated, you could get reinfected. Your partner will need to have a check-up even if they have no symptoms.

It may not be easy to tell your partner. Try to choose a good time to raise the subject – when both of you are relaxed and not likely to be interrupted. Try to share the responsibility. It is better to use phrases such as “what are we going to do about this?” than “what are you going to do?” Be aware that you or your partner may have become infected many months ago from a previous sexual partner without realising it.

Sometimes it is helpful if partners go to a clinic together. You will be seen separately, but you can support one another and share advice and information about your sexual health.

‘Partner notification’

If you think it is going to be too difficult to talk to your partner for any reason, you can send them a ‘contact slip’ which the clinic will give you. The doctor, health adviser or nurse can do this for you if you give them your partner’s details.

The contact slip explains that the partner may have been exposed to a sexually transmitted infection. It suggests that they make an appointment for a check-up with their GP or sexual health clinic. Your identity and infection are not disclosed.

The contact slip is one way of notifying your partner. There are other ways. The doctor, health adviser or nurse will talk
through the options with you. Nothing will be done without your consent. The clinic may not encourage notifying your partner if this is likely to place you in any danger.

Further advice
You can get free, confidential treatment and advice at any NHS sexual health (GUM) clinic or from your GP. You can find details of your nearest sexual health clinic in the phone book under genito-urinary medicine (GUM), sexually transmitted diseases (STD) or venereal disease (VD) clinic. Or phone your local hospital and ask for the ‘special’ or GUM clinic.

You can find information about clinics on our sexual health website: www.lovelife.uk.com

The groups and services listed on the back cover may be able to help you. Many are national organisations, so you may need to call them for details of your nearest local branch or helpline.
Further information

Health Promotion England produces a range of leaflets about sexual health, including:

• Facts about AIDS, HIV and the test
• Lovelife: Sexual health for young people
• Sexual health for women
• Sexual health for men
• Cystitis: Bladder infection and what to do about it

A series of factsheets is also available on a range of infections and conditions. These include bacterial vaginosis, chlamydia, cystitis, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, hepatitis (A, B and C), pubic lice, scabies, non-specific urethritis, penile cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), prostate cancer, syphilis, testicular cancer, thrush and trichomonas vaginalis.

To order free copies of sexual health leaflets phone the National AIDS Helpline on FREEPHONE 0800 567 123. For copies of any health education leaflet or factsheet, contact your local health promotion unit (in the phone book under your local health authority).

Turn over for useful contact numbers.

This leaflet can only give basic information about sexual health. The information is based on the evidence and medical opinion available at the time of printing.
Contact numbers

Brook Helpline 0800 0185023

Free, confidential sex advice and contraception for young people. Ring for details of your nearest branch or health authority young people’s service. Mon-Fri 9am-5pm. Website: www.brook.org.uk

Contraceptive Education Service (England) 0845 310 1334

A confidential helpline providing information on all methods of contraception, sexual health and local clinics. Mon-Fri 9am-7pm. Website: www.fpa.org.uk

London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard 020 7837 7324

A 24-hour, 7-days-a-week helpline offering a range of services, including sexual health advice.

National AIDS Helpline (NAH) 0800 567 123

A 24-hour, 7-day-a-week, free and confidential telephone service with advice about HIV, AIDS, sexual health, local services, clinics and support services. For details of minority ethnic language services phone NAH.

Welsh Language Service 0800 567123, daily 11am-11pm. A minicom service is available for people with hearing difficulties on 0800 521 361, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

National AIDS Helpline Language Line 0800 917 2227

This is a multi-language line with an opening menu in Punjabi, Bengali, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Arabic and Cantonese. You will be able to listen to messages in each language. From 6pm to 10pm on the following days, you will be able to talk to someone who is fluent in each language.

Monday Bengali Thursday Gujarati
Tuesday Urdu Friday Hindi
Wednesday Arabic Saturday Punjabi
Sunday Cantonese

You will need to listen out for your own language and choose the number you want.

Remember: contact a sexual health clinic or your doctor if you are worried or unsure about anything to do with your sexual health.


Health Promotion England
40 Eastbourne Terrace
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www.hpe.org.uk
www.lovelife.uk.com