Sexually Transmitted Infections

Where to go for help and advice

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This leaflet explains where you can get help and advice if you think that you might have a sexually transmitted infection, are worried about your sexual health or would like a check-up. All services are confidential.

What is a sexually transmitted infection?
If one person has an infection it can pass to another person through vaginal, anal or oral sex. Infections spread in this way are known as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Anyone who has sex can get an STI. You don’t need to have lots of sexual partners. Both men and women can get and pass on STIs.

Most STIs are easily treated but treatment should be started as soon as possible. For some infections, such as HIV (the virus that causes AIDS), there is currently no cure and the treatment can be complicated. If left untreated many STIs can be painful and uncomfortable or, at worst, cause permanent damage to your health and fertility.

Infections you might have heard of are:
- chlamydia
- NSU (non-specific urethritis)
- genital warts
- herpes
- gonorrhoea
- pubic lice
- trichomonas vaginalis
- syphilis
- HIV
- hepatitis B
How will I know if I have an infection?
Not everyone who has an STI has signs and/or symptoms. Sometimes these don’t appear for months and sometimes they go away but you can still have the infection. **If you experience any of the following you should seek advice:**

- unusual discharge from the vagina
- discharge from the penis
- pain or burning when you pass urine
- itches, rashes, lumps or blisters around the genitals or anus
- pain and/or bleeding during sex
- bleeding between periods (including women who are using hormonal contraception)
- bleeding after sex
- pain in the testicles or lower abdomen.

Even if you don’t have any signs and/or symptoms you may also wish to seek advice or have a check-up particularly if:

- you have had unprotected sex with a new partner recently
- you or your sexual partner have sex with other people without using a condom
- your sexual partner has any symptoms.

Where can I go for advice about STIs?
There are several services that you can go to for help and advice:

- any NHS genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic (sometimes known as special clinics, VD clinics or STD clinics)
- your GP or practice nurse
- a sexual health clinic
- a family planning clinic
• a young people’s clinic (these services usually have an upper age limit).

Regardless of your age, ethnic group, whether you are male or female, gay, lesbian, straight or bisexual you can get confidential information and advice about STIs. Wherever you go, you shouldn’t be judged because of your sexual behaviour, but go to a service where you feel comfortable. Some services hold separate sessions for men, women, young people, gay men and lesbians. If you choose to go to a sexual health or a genitourinary medicine clinic, you can go to any in the country. You do not need a referral from your GP.

Testing and treatment
Not all the services listed above can offer testing and treatment for all infections. You can call first to check. GUM clinics (and some sexual health clinics) offer a full range of tests, treatments and advice on all infections. If you agree, they can also help to confidentially trace previous sexual partners who may need treatment (partner notification).

If your GP or family planning clinic cannot provide the tests and/or treatment that you need, they will be able to give you details of the nearest clinic that can.

In addition to tests and treatments for infection there may be other services available such as:
• free condoms
• special sessions for people who have been sexually assaulted
• psychosexual counselling
• hepatitis B vaccination.
Will I need to make an appointment?
Appointments are usually necessary but it's best to ring first and check. If you have signs and/or symptoms that are concerning you explain this when you ring as they may be able to see you sooner. Try not to have sex, at least until after you’ve been seen and have advice from the GP or clinic. If this isn’t possible make sure you use a condom.

Will I need to pay?
All advice, information and tests are free. If you go to your GP you may have to pay a prescription charge for treatment.

Are sexual health services confidential?
Yes, all health services are completely confidential. Only where it is in your interests and in extreme circumstances can information about you be passed on and only with your permission. Although many GUM clinics are based in hospitals, they keep their written and computer records separate from any other notes you may have there.

If you have any concerns about who will see your medical records, talk to your GP or the staff at the clinic.
What happens at a sexual health service?

Exactly what happens can vary depending on where you go. If you are a new patient at a GUM, sexual health or family planning clinic, you will be asked to fill in a registration form with details of your name and address. This information will be kept confidential. You will then see a doctor, nurse or health adviser.

The check up
The doctor, nurse or health adviser will talk to you about your concerns. They will need to ask you questions about your sex life and about any signs and/or symptoms that you have. You might feel embarrassed, but do be honest as these questions help the clinic to do the correct tests. If you are not sure why the questions are being asked – just say so.

You may need to have some tests. These usually involve an examination and the testing of some samples. In both men and women this may mean:
- an examination of your genitals, mouth, anus and skin to look for any obvious signs of infection