

A Practical Guide for the Tongue-Tied:

How to Talk With your Health Care Provider about HPV & other STDs

Lots of People have STDs

Many people believe they are not at risk for sexually transmitted diseases. But STDs are the nation's most common type of infection. Even people who have had only one sexual partner can have an STD. You are at risk if:

- **You or your partner have ever had another partner**
- **You don't know your partner's sexual history**
- **You have ever had unprotected sex**
- **You have symptoms such as warts, sores, burning, or redness in your genital area**

Why Talk with your Health Care Provider?

Many people feel that talking about sexual health can be awkward or embarrassing. But there are good reasons to start the conversation. Some STDs can cause lasting damage or become more difficult to treat the longer you wait. Enlisting the help of your health care provider is the first step in diagnosing and treating any sexually transmitted disease – and protecting your sexual health.

How to Start Talking

You may expect your provider to ask you about your risk for STDs. But even if your provider doesn't ask, bring it up. Here are some ways to start talking:

"I have a new boyfriend and we haven't been using condoms every time. Am I at risk for a sexually transmitted disease?"

"My girlfriend found out she has genital warts. I'd like to be checked for warts and other STDs."

What to Tell your Provider

Your provider needs to know some personal information about you so that she or he can assess your risk for STD's and decide what tests to order. You may want to talk to your provider about the following:

- **Your sexual history**
- **Your current sexual practices**
- **About your condom use**
- **Any symptoms you have**
- **If you could be pregnant**

What to Ask your Provider about your Sexual Health

It may help to bring a list of questions to your office visit. You also may want to write down the information you learn. The following are some questions you may want to ask about your risk for STDs and how to protect yourself:

- **What is an STD?**
- **Could I have an STD and not know it?**
- **How often should I be tested for STDs?**
- **Should I be tested for any STDs today?**
- **How often should I have a Pap smear?**
- **How can I protect myself and my partner from STDs?**

Tips for Raising your Comfort Level

Most people feel more comfortable talking either before or after the exam – while they are fully dressed. Tell your provider you would like 10 to 15 minutes to discuss your health concerns. If your provider uses medical terms you don't understand, ask for an explanation. You have a right to understand words related to your health.

If you are Diagnosed with an STD

The good news is that all STDs can be treated or cured. Those caused by bacteria (such as chlamydia or gonorrhea) can be cured with antibiotics. Those caused by a virus (such as herpes or HPV) cannot be cured, but they can be treated to relieve symptoms.

- **Follow your provider's treatment directions**
- **Ask your provider about ways to avoid spreading the STD to a partner**
- **Tell your partner you have an STD. Ask your partner to get tested too**
- **Avoid sex until both you and your partner have been treated**
- **Return for follow-up care if your provider asks you to**

Coming to Terms with how you Feel

Many people are shocked or upset when they learn they have an STD. But remember, STDs are very common. Getting one does not mean you are bad or different. The most important step is to get help – by talking with your health care provider and learning what you need to know about how to protect yourself and others.

About HPV and Genital Warts

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is one of the most common STDs, so you may have specific concerns you want to discuss with your provider. Some types of HPV can cause genital warts – growths or bumps that appear on the penis, anus, vulva, vagina, cervix, or thigh. Other types of HPV infect the cervix, and can lead to cervical cancer unless the condition is treated. HPV often causes no symptoms.

HPV and Cervical Cancer

The types of HPV linked to cervical cancer are usually not the types that cause genital warts. But a woman with genital warts, like any other sexually active woman, should get yearly Pap smears. The Pap smear detects abnormal cells caused by HPV that can lead to cancer. With regular Pap smears and follow-up care, cervical cancer can almost always be prevented or cured.

How Genital Warts are Treated

Because HPV is a virus, symptoms such as genital warts can be treated but not cured. The average patient may need a few treatments to clear genital warts. With all treatments, warts may recur.

Two types of treatment (imiquimod and podofilox) are creams or gels that can be applied by the patient at home. Other treatments (cryotherapy, podophyllin, TCA, and BCA) freeze or burn off the warts with chemicals. These treatments must be applied by a doctor. Treatments such as surgery and laser therapy must be performed by a doctor who has experience with these techniques.

What to ask your Provider about Treatments for Genital Warts

- **What treatment(s) do you recommend for my case? Why?**
- **What are the benefits of treatment?**
- **Does this treatment cause pain, scarring, or other bad side effects?**
- **How long does this treatment take?**
- **Can I apply this treatment myself?**
- **How much does this treatment cost?**
- **What kind of follow-up will be needed?**

For More Information

To learn more, talk with your health care provider, or call:

CDC National STD Hotline
1-800-227-8922

The American Social Health Association (ASHA) is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to stopping all STDs and their harmful consequences to individuals, families, and communities. ASHA operates the national AIDS and STD hotlines under contract with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, publishes this and other pamphlets on sexually transmitted diseases, operates a fellowship program for STD research, and advocates for increased government attention to STDs, including HPV.

For more information, write:

American Social Health Association
P.O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709-3827

<http://www.ashastd.org>

If you are a health care professional and wish to order a catalog of educational materials, please call
1-800-783-9877