



## Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs), Risk of HIV Infection, and Condoms: What You Need to Know

### *What are sexually transmitted diseases?*

Sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs, are infections that are spread through sexual contact. You can develop an infection through sexual contact with various body parts: the penis, vagina, anus, mouth, and throat. STDs can be caused by bacteria or viruses. Bacterial infections can often be cured with antibiotics, medicines that kill bacteria. Unfortunately, few treatments are effective against viral infections. Although some treatments help relieve the symptoms and discomfort associated with viral STDs, they do not cure the underlying infection. Some viral STDs are painful or unsightly (herpes or warts), while another, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), is fatal.

### **Symptoms of STDs**

#### ***In Women:***

- Sores on or in vagina, on labia, on or around the anus, or mouth
- Irregular growths (warts) in genital area
- Vaginal discharge (may be foul-smelling or discolored)
- Vaginal itching
- Pain on urination or having a bowel movement
- Pain with intercourse
- Bleeding or spotting after sexual intercourse
- Lower abdominal pain
- Pain or swelling of glands in groin area
- Rash

#### ***In Men:***

- Sores on penis, or on or around the anus
- Penile discharge
- Pain on urination
- Pain or swelling of glands in groin area
- Rash

### *What are some common STDs?*

Some of the STDs you may have heard about are syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes, and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), which is caused by HIV. Other types of infections include genital warts (human papillomavirus or HPV), chancroid, and trichomoniasis.

### *How can I tell if I have an STD?*

*Sometimes you can tell if you have an STD and sometimes you cannot.* This is because many times the infection doesn't cause any symptoms, *especially in women.* Another reason is that the signs of the STD, ulcers or breaks in the skin for example, can occur inside the woman's vagina or on the cervix, where they can't be seen. In men, it's usually easier to tell if an STD is present because the sores occur on the outside of the penis, and it's easy to see any discharge or pus. Symptoms of STDs in women include a vaginal discharge that may have an odor or an unusual texture or color, pain with urination, sores or growths on the labia or near the anus, and lower abdominal pain.

### *What should I do if I think I might have an STD?*

If you think you have an STD, or you've been sexually active with someone who might have an STD, you should see your health care provider. If you don't have a primary care clinician, call your local health department to find a nearby STD clinic. Look in the white pages of the phone book under the name of the county you live in and check to find their health services department. STD clinics specialize in the treatment of these diseases and can provide the right kind of care for you and your sexual partner or partners.

## *One Reason It's Important to Get Treatment for STDs*

Researchers believe that having an STD increases your chances of becoming infected with HIV. HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, a fatal sexually transmitted disease. People with STDs, particularly the kinds that cause ulcers or sores on the genitals (such as syphilis, chancroid, and herpes), are many times more likely to get HIV infection than those who do not have these STDs. This is because the HIV virus can more easily pass through breaks in the skin than through intact healthy skin.

Other types of STDs such as chlamydial infection, gonorrhea, and trichomoniasis also appear to about double or triple your risk of getting infected with HIV. Although the way this occurs is not fully understood, it may be because these diseases cause the genital tissue to become inflamed (red and swollen). Inflamed tissues may be more susceptible to HIV infection.

## *How can I protect myself against STDs?*

The surest way to protect yourself is to avoid sexual relations. If you choose to be sexually active, you should stay with one partner (who should be faithful as well) who does not have any STDs. You are particularly at risk of getting an STD if you have more than one sexual partner, or if your partner has more than one sexual partner. If you or your partner use drugs intravenously then you also should protect yourself (HIV can be spread through sharing needles). Therefore, if you use drugs intravenously don't share needles. If you are sexually active use a latex condom. Remember, insisting on condom use at the beginning of a sexual relationship may be easier than waiting until after the sexual relationship has progressed.

Latex condoms have been shown to help prevent all types of STDs. Are they a guarantee? No, but if condoms are used correctly, **100% of the time**, they provide the best protection currently available. In the largest study of couples in which one partner had HIV and the other did not, no uninfected partner got HIV when the couples used condoms correctly and with every act of intercourse.

## *What types of condoms should I use?*

You should use a male latex condom to protect yourself against HIV infection and other STDs. If your partner refuses to use a male latex condom, you may wish to use a female condom to help protect yourself. If you are allergic to latex, a plastic (polyurethane) male condom is available on the U.S. market. Male and female condoms are available over the counter in drug stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores. You do not need to see a doctor or talk to a pharmacist to get condoms.

How spermicides affect the risk of HIV infection is not clear at this time. Some evidence suggests that nonoxynol-9 (the active ingredient in most U.S. spermicides) may increase the risk of HIV infection due to vaginal irritation. Other data suggest spermicides might help prevent HIV infection. Spermicides come in jellies, creams, or foam and are also available in drug stores, supermarkets, and convenience stores without a prescription. Some condoms come with spermicides already in them. Read the instructions that come inside the box for complete information on how to use these products.

## ***Tips for Correct Condom Use***

- Use a new condom with every act of intercourse; never reuse a condom.
- Make sure the condom hasn't expired; old condoms may have tears or cracks.
- If using a spermicide, use one containing nonoxynol-9 (some condoms come with the spermicide already in them).
- Place the spermicide on the inside tip of the condom (women can use spermicide in the vagina as well).
- Gently but firmly roll the condom down the penis, leaving some space at the tip.
- After ejaculation (coming) the man needs to remove the penis from the vagina while the penis is still hard. This is to prevent the condom from slipping off.
- Hold the end of the condom at the base of the penis when removing the penis from the vagina.