

**Female Health Issues:
Sexually Transmitted Disease and Your Pelvic Health**

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❖ Sexually Transmitted Diseases:

Sexually Transmitted Diseases, or STD's, are some of the most common infectious diseases in the United States. An infectious disease is one that can be spread from one person to another, and STD's are spread by sexual contact with another person, including oral, anal, and vaginal sex. There are many types of STD's, and the most common include gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and the most deadly, HIV. There are three different types of infectious agents that cause these infections, and this relates to how they are treated. The following paragraphs describe these infections in further detail.

Some STD's are caused by viruses, which are molecules that are non-living but can multiply once they have infected a host. Viral STD's include herpes simplex virus (HSV), human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis B, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

- The main sign of herpes is the appearance of painful blisters in the genital and anal area, which may be preceded by a burning or tingling feeling in this area. In women, these blisters may appear in the vagina, where they often go unnoticed. These sores will go away in 2-3 weeks, but the virus remains in the body and may cause sores again in the future. There is no cure for herpes, but outbreaks can be controlled with medications from your doctor.
- HPV is a virus that causes genital warts. These warts usually develop as small, hard, painless bumps in the genital and anal areas, but may progress to a cauliflower-like appearance if untreated. HPV may also infect the cells of the cervix, and if undetected lead to cervical cancer (next section) and other genital cancers. Genital warts can be treated with medications applied directly to the wart, or they may be frozen off by your doctor.
- Hepatitis B, like other forms of hepatitis, is a virus that can cause damage to the liver. It can be transmitted through sexual contact and by sharing hypodermic needles. There is no cure, but your doctor can monitor you for progression and treat you for complications.
- HIV is an infection that attacks the immune system of its host. The infected person will develop a weakened immune system over the course of many years, and will be prone to developing other types of infections. The advanced stage of HIV infection is AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). There is no cure for HIV or AIDS, but it can be monitored and controlled with medications prescribed by your doctor.

Other types of STD's are caused by bacteria, microscopic living organisms that can multiply in their host.

- Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STD. This infection may cause an abnormal vaginal discharge or burning during urination. Unfortunately, chlamydia may not cause any symptoms at all! If untreated, it may go on to cause PID (next section). Chlamydia can be cured with antibiotics.

- Gonorrhea is another bacterial STD, and may also cause abnormal vaginal discharge and painful or difficult urination. It is also cured with antibiotics.
- Syphilis usually presents as ulcer-like lesions in the genital area, and because they are painless they may go unnoticed. These lesions may disappear, but later a temporary rash may appear. If the infection remains untreated, over the course of years the heart and central nervous system may be affected. This infection is also treated with antibiotics.

A third group of STD's are caused by parasites, living organisms that feed off of their host.

- The most common parasitic STD is pubic lice, or crabs. They are passed during sexual activity, but can also be spread from contact with bed sheets, etc. The lice cause itching which may lead to inflammation. The lice can be killed with special shampoos.

❖ Your Pelvic Health:

- How can I avoid getting an STD?
 - Because STD's may be asymptomatic, it is important to know if you are at risk for acquiring an STD. Anyone who is having sex is at risk for acquiring an STD! This risk increases if you are having sex with multiple partners (men or women!), and if you use I.V. drugs. If you believe you are at risk, it is important that you always use a latex condom during sex, and ask your partner if he or she has an STD (or any sores, rashes, or discharge from the genital area). See your doctor regularly to test for the presence of STD's, even if you don't have any symptoms. Your doctor can test for these by doing a blood test as well as a pelvic exam. If an STD is detected, your doctor can treat you (and maybe your partners) for the infections.
- What if I'm pregnant?
 - Untreated STD's in pregnant women can cause spontaneous abortion (miscarriage), low birth weight, premature birth, and permanent neurological damage to the newborn. Part of your prenatal care will include testing for STD's, so it is important to see your doctor early during your pregnancy and regularly throughout your pregnancy.
- What if I have an STD that goes untreated?
 - First of all, you can spread the infection to others. More importantly to your own health, however, are the consequences of untreated infections, especially bacterial infections. Again, untreated syphilis can cause permanent damage to the heart and nervous system. Untreated gonorrhea or chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). This can occur when the bacteria spread to infect the other parts of the female pelvic anatomy, including the cervix, uterus, and fallopian tubes. The bacteria can cause inflammation and pain. The scarring that occurs may lead to an increased risk of ectopic pregnancy, infertility, and chronic pelvic pain.
- If viral STD's can't be cured, how do I avoid getting cervical cancer?
 - It is important that you visit your doctor to receive a pap smear. A pap smear is performed by taking a sample of cells from the cervix. Your doctor can tell you how often you should be getting a pap smear. It is important to know that a pap smear is NOT performed every time you have a pelvic exam! Asking



your doctor if he or she is performing a pap smear will help you keep track of when your pap smears have occurred.

For further information, you might find the following websites useful:

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/tutorials/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>

<http://www.epiqee.org/guide/stds.html>

<http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaq/>

For information on how to get testing in the Indianapolis area, visit the Marion County Health Department website at <http://www.mchd.com/pd.htm>.