

Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections (**STIs**) are infections spread through contact between people that have sexual relations.

Which infections are they?

The term *STI* is basically used to refer to:

- Syphilis.
- Gonorrhoea, chlamydia, mycoplasma and trichomoniasis.
- Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).
- Hepatitis B virus. In certain cases, hepatitis A and C viruses as well.
- Human papilloma virus and genital warts.
- Genital herpes.
- Skin parasites: scabies and pubic lice.

Depending on your sexual activity they may affect you:

Genitals: a burning sensation or pain when urinating, unusual discharge from the vagina or penis, sometimes with pus, pain in the lower abdomen, pain during sex or bleeding after intercourse.

Anus: painful bowel movements, bleeding or anal discharge.

Mouth: You may have an infection without experiencing any discomfort.

Skin: pruritus, itching (scabies), genital warts or molluscum (water warts).

What happens if they aren't treated?

Some STIs cause no symptoms at all and go unnoticed, but are equally contagious and can cause lesions at the site of infection and then spread to other organs. Some STIs can affect your reproductive system and cause infertility or serious infections; others, like syphilis, can affect your heart, brain or kidneys. HIV requires treatment and check-ups for the rest of your life to manage the virus and its complications.

Are they very common?

Since the beginning of this century there has been a steady increase in the number of STIs throughout the world. This increase is a consequence of various social and behavioural factors, screening strategies, etc.

Although some people are more vulnerable than others, STIs can affect anybody, especially during the most sexually-active stages in life.

Which sexual practices put you at risk?

- Sex with **multiple partners** or with partners that you don't know if they are infected.
- Not using a **condom** for oral, genital or anal sex.
- Some activities can injure the skin and increase the risk of infection: anal penetration, *fisting* (inserting your arm in the vagina or anus), sex toys that haven't been properly washed, not using enough lubricant.
- Sexual activities in a context where **drugs** are taken: protective measures get "dropped". An example of this is *chemsex* (having sex for long periods, usually in a group and with the aid of drugs).

How can you avoid catching them?

Male and female condoms provide the most effective barrier protection against STIs. You should use them for genital, anal and oral sex. Avoid mixing drugs and sex.

You should go for regular tests and check-ups, the frequency depending on your sexual activity.

What should you do if you suspect that you've got an STI?

Go to your doctor for the right test. If it is confirmed that you have an infection, follow the complete treatment, right to the end, and avoid having sex while you are on it.

It is very important to tell all your sexual partners so that they can be screened and treated and so stop the infectious cycle.