

SEXUAL HEALTH IN PLAIN ENGLISH

STIS (SEXUALLY TRANSMISSIBLE INFECTIONS) AND BBVS (BLOOD-BORNE VIRUSES)

Safer sex

If someone is planning on having sexual contact with someone else, they need to be thinking about contraception and safer sex. ([see the Contraception factsheet](#)).

Safer sex means protecting against unintended pregnancy and some infections (called STIs) which can be spread through sexual contact.

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) and blood-borne viruses (BBVs) can affect anybody.

When it comes to infections:

- some can be treated by taking medicine,
- some will resolve without treatment, and
- some stay for the rest of the person's life and may need to be monitored.

STIs are mainly spread by having unprotected sex (e.g. sex without a condom) with someone who has an STI. The infections are usually passed on through skin around the genital area and sexual fluids such as:

- Semen (cum)
- Vaginal fluids
- Anal fluids (from inside a person's bottom)
- Blood

There are different types of STIs:

- Viruses (for example: herpes and HPV)
- Bacteria (for example: chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis)
- Parasites (for example: trichomonas and pubic lice)

'Blood-borne' means that the infection is carried in the blood. BBVs are mainly spread when the blood of an infected person enters another person's blood.

Some BBVs are also STIs. For example, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) can be spread through blood-to-blood contact and sexual fluids.

How can a person lower their risk of getting STIs and BBVs?

A person can lower their risk of getting an STI by having safer sex.

Safer sex means using barriers, (e.g. condoms, dental dams), during any type of sex (vaginal, anal or oral sex) or if using sex toys. A new condom/dental dam needs to be used when changing from one type of sex to another or if sharing sex toys. Condoms/dental dams are not 100% effective at preventing STIs. Talk to your doctor or nurse about testing.

External condoms

These are thin rubber (usually latex) tubes that cover an erect (stiff) penis or sex toy before sex.

Internal condoms

These are a type of thin rubber tube that is put inside the vagina or anus before sex.

Dental dam

These are thin rubber (usually latex) sheets that stop a person's mouth coming into contact with the skin on someone else's genitals (vulva or anus).

A person can lower their risk of STIs and BBVs by:

- using condoms/dental dams correctly every time you have sex (vaginal, anal, oral).
- not sharing injecting equipment, razors or nail clippers and only getting tattoos and piercing in regulated places.
- being vaccinated or taking some medications to lower the risk of some STIs and BBVs.

Vaccinations

Vaccinations are available to help prevent some STIs or BBVs, including:

- Human papillomavirus (HPV)
- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B

PrEP and PEP

If the person thinks there might be a risk of being exposed to HIV, there are medicines available to reduce the chance of getting this virus.

PrEP is a daily medication used by people who don't have HIV but are at risk of getting it.

These might include people who:

- have a sex partner who is HIV positive and is not on treatment
- have sex with people whose HIV status is not known
- share injection drug equipment
- PrEP reduces the transmission of HIV by up to 90%.

PEP is a medicine used by people who don't have HIV but think they may have been exposed to HIV. PEP is taken in emergency situations, within 72 hours after exposure to the virus.

It is not meant to be for long term use.

How would a person know if they have an STI or a BBV?

Regular testing is the best way to know if you have an STI or a BBV.

Many people do not know they have an STI or a BBV because they do not have symptoms.

Some people might have symptoms such as:

- itchy around the vagina, penis or anus
- pain during urination (peeing)
- smelly or strangely coloured discharge (fluid) from the vagina, penis or anus
- pain during sex
- abnormal vaginal bleeding

How often should a person be tested for STIs or BBVs?

- If a person is under 30, they should test once a year, even if they use condoms 100% of the time.
- If a person is a male who has sex with other males, they should test every 3 months, depending on their risk.
- A person should get tested as soon as possible if they have any symptoms or if they are worried for any reason.

What can a person do if they think they have an STI or BBV?

Most people do not know they have an STI or a BBV because they do not have symptoms. If a person thinks they might have an STI or a BBV, they should see their doctor or nurse to get tested and treated, if needed. Some infections can cause serious health problems if not treated. For example, untreated infections could lead to infertility (not being able to have children). Many STIs can be easily treated if found early.

Practice safer sex and do not share any equipment that can pass on blood.

What should a person do if a sexual contact (or partner) of theirs has been diagnosed with an STI or a BBV?

A person may be notified that a sexual contact of theirs has been diagnosed with an STI or BBV in person or via a phone call, text message, letter or email. They, too, may have an infection and not know it as they may not have symptoms. It's important to talk to a doctor or nurse to get tested and treated, if needed.

STI prevention and contraception is the responsibility of all people involved in having sex.