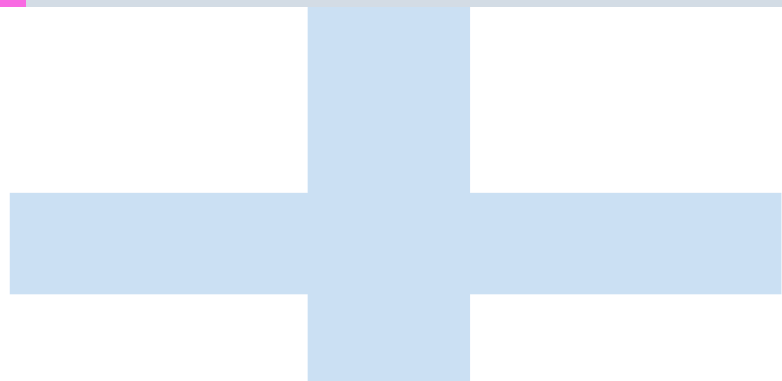


THE  
WELL  
WOMAN  
CENTRE

Safe Sex & Sexually Transmitted Infections



## SAFE SEX AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

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## SAFE SEX AND SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

### What are STIs?

Sexually transmitted infections are caused by bacteria and viruses, which can be passed from one person to another during sexual contact. If left untreated they can cause serious and irreversible damage to your pelvis. This may result in pelvic pain, increase the risk of ectopic pregnancies or make you infertile due to complete blockage of your fallopian tubes. Some of the infections have widespread effects on vital organs.

### Who gets sexually transmitted infections (STIs)?

Sexually transmitted infections are common. When you have sex with a new partner you could be putting yourself at risk of getting an infection. Unfortunately a lot of infections are silent so you may not realise that you have a problem for several days, weeks or even months. Your partner is also unlikely to know that they could be passing an infection on to you. So anyone can be infected from a single sexual contact with an infected person.

### Safe Sex

Condoms, when used properly, are the most reliable way to protect against getting an infection. Some infections such as herpes and genital warts can be passed on by simple skin-to-skin contact. A condom should be put on before any genital contact is made to reduce the risk of getting one of these infections. Do not use oil-based lubricants because they weaken the condom and make it useless for protection. If your partner has a cold sore, having oral sex will also put you at risk of getting genital herpes. Also, using alcohol or drugs may lower your ability to make responsible decisions about your sexual behaviour.

### What are the symptoms?

In many cases there are no symptoms. However, if you are sexually active and develop any of the following problems you should go to a doctor immediately.

- ❖ Unusual vaginal discharge
  
- ❖ Pain when passing urine

- ❖ Sores or blisters in the genital area
  
- ❖ Itching or irritation in the genital area
  
- ❖ Pain during intercourse

## What will happen if I go to a doctor?

Firstly it is important that you go to a clinic that can properly investigate your symptoms. If your doctor does not have the facilities to do tests s/he will refer you to either the public STI clinics in St James Hospital or the Mater Hospital (in Dublin), or to a private clinic such as Well Woman. You may also make an appointment in one of the Well Woman clinics without needing a referral from your GP. At the Well Woman Centre we would discuss your symptoms with you, take the appropriate tests, provide treatment if necessary and advise on future follow up.

There are facilities available throughout Ireland and addresses and contact details are listed in the Department of Health leaflet on STIs.

## What infections are tested for?

There is a long list of infections that can be tested for: chlamydia, trichomonas, gardnerella, gonorrhoea, herpes, HIV, hepatitis B, hepatitis C, syphilis.

## Genital Warts

Genital warts are the most common infection. It cannot be tested for but is diagnosed when a person develops small lumps in the skin in the genital area. There are several different ways to treat genital warts including using a medicated cream or cryotherapy (freezing). If you have been diagnosed as having genital warts it is important that you get screened for other sexually transmitted infections because there is a risk that you may have picked up some other infection at the same time. Some types of wart virus can cause problems on your cervix so regular smear tests are recommended.

## Chlamydia

This is an infection that often has no symptoms. If it is not treated it is a major cause of pelvic inflammatory disease. This may result in pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancies and infertility. It is estimated that at least one in twenty young women have this infection. It is easily detected on either a urine or vaginal sample and the treatment is a very short course of antibiotics.

## Trichomonas, gardnerella and gonorrhoea

These are less common. Most men will have pain passing urine or a discharge from the penis if they have gonorrhoea. Women often have no symptoms. The opposite is the case with trichomonas – most women will have a vaginal discharge and pain passing urine if they have trichomonas but men tend to have no symptoms. Gardnerella is not considered to be a sexually transmitted infection but it can cause symptoms in women similar to those mentioned above. All of these infections can be treated with a simple course of antibiotics.

## Herpes

There are two types of herpes virus. Herpes type 1 is the virus that causes cold sores. This can be transmitted to the genital area during oral sex. The virus can be passed on even before the cold sore appears – in the “tingling” phase. Herpes type 2 causes genital herpes. The first episode of a herpes infection may be very painful. Small painful sores and blisters develop often associated with a flu-like illness. Symptoms settle within a week. The infection can recur particularly at times of stress. There is no cure but sometimes antiviral medication is prescribed to reduce the severity of an attack.

## HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C

These are all viral infections. They can be transmitted during unprotected sex or other exchange of body fluids such as sharing needles. It may take up to three months after contact with an infected person for the viruses to be detectable in a blood sample. There may be no obvious symptoms for many months or even years. Sometimes a flu-like illness happens a few weeks after the initial exposure. Inflammation of the liver (hepatitis) may cause jaundice. Anti viral medication is used to help suppress virus activity.

## Syphilis

This is a bacterial infection that can be detected on a blood sample. 50% of infected people have no symptoms. There may be a painless sore in the mouth or genital area that heals by itself after about a month. This is followed by a generalised rash with flu-like symptoms that also resolves with no treatment. If undetected and untreated syphilis can cause damage to the heart, brain and other vital organs. Antibiotic treatment is very successful provided it is given in the early stages of the disease.

If you think that you are at risk - get tested. The sooner an infection is diagnosed and treated the greater the chance that you will avoid long-term problems.

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