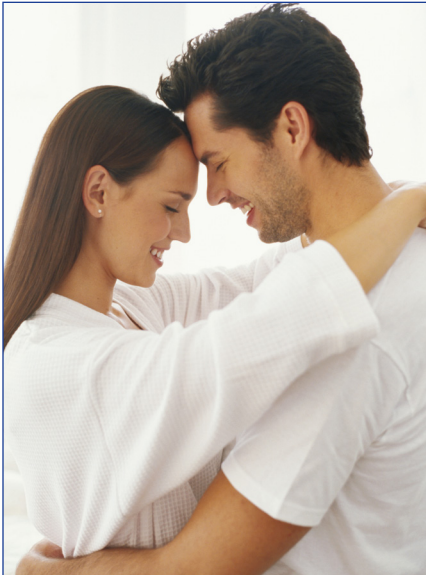


# Sexual Health in Young Adulthood

## *Protecting Yourself from Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)*

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**Y**oung adults must be educated about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and the behaviors that put them at risk for contracting or spreading infection. Such knowledge affects sexual health—a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality—and leads to positive attitudes and behaviors, reduces the risk of STIs, HIV and unplanned pregnancy, and increases overall health and well-being.

Sexual health is associated with health and pleasure in addition to emotional and social well-being. It also refers to the ability to have an informed, enjoyable, and safer sex life, based on mutual respect and a positive approach to sexual expression. It involves enjoyment and expression of sexuality free from unintended pregnancy, coercion, violence, and discrimination.

Men and women value different things in their sexual and intimate relationships and enjoy different sexual activities. Sexual expression may include masturbation, same sex partners, opposite sex partners, or a combination of partners. One way to maintain your sexual health is to be aware of your values and desires so that you can make decisions that are

right for you. Another key to maintaining your sexual health is to practice safer sex in order to avoid sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

### **What Are STIs?**

STIs, also known as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), are contracted by having contact with someone who is already infected.

### **Did you know?**

- 89% of men and 92% of women ages 22 to 24 have had sexual intercourse.
- 7.1% of males and 13.4% of females ages 20 to 24 report having an STI.
- 62% of women ages 15 to 44 use contraceptives.

STIs, caused by various bacteria, viruses, and parasites, are the most common infectious diseases in the United States. There are more than 25 STIs that affect both men and women. Left untreated, they can cause serious health problems and damage, including infertility (inability to have a baby) and death (in the cases of HIV/AIDS and untreated syphilis).

There are three categories of STIs—bacterial, viral, and parasitic—reflecting the type of microorganism that causes a specific disease. Bacterial and parasitic STIs are curable with antibiotics, but damage or scars from the infections can be permanent. Virus-based STIs are not curable, but they can be managed with medication.

Some of the more common STIs include:

- Bacterial
  - Chlamydia
  - Gonorrhea
  - Syphilis
- Viral
  - Herpes
  - Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)
  - Hepatitis A
  - Hepatitis B
  - Hepatitis C (HCV)
  - HIV/AIDS
- Parasitic
  - Trichomoniasis
  - Scabies
  - Pubic lice (“crabs”)

### **Your risk of getting an STI increases if you:**

- Begin sexual activity at a young age
- Have multiple sex partners
- Participate in unprotected sexual activity

### **STIs Affect Pregnant Women and Babies**

Babies can also contract STIs from the mother before, during or after birth. Syphilis, for example, can cross the placenta and infect a baby while it is in the womb.

Gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis B, and genital herpes can be transmitted from the mother to the baby during delivery. HIV not only crosses the placenta during pregnancy, but it can also infect a baby during delivery and through breastfeeding. The harmful effects of STIs in babies include:

- Low birth weight (less than 5 pounds)
- Eye infections
- Blindness
- Deafness
- Neurologic damage
- Problems with the liver
- Acute hepatitis meningitis
- Stillbirth

A pregnant woman with an STI may also experience early onset labor, premature

rupture of the membranes surrounding the baby in the uterus and uterine infections after delivery.

Some of these problems can be treated if the infection is found at birth. But most of these problems can be prevented if the mother receives routine prenatal care, including tests for STIs, starting early in the pregnancy and repeated close to delivery. Some antibiotics can be prescribed during pregnancy to treat and cure some of the bacterial and parasitic STIs. Antiviral medications may be appropriate for some of the viral STIs, including herpes and HIV. Cesarean delivery (C-section) can be performed to protect newborns against certain infections, such as active genital herpes and HIV infection.



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**Remember:** It is *your* responsibility to protect your sexual health in regard to STIs. Regular check-ups, up-to-date vaccines, abstaining from sex or properly using a condom or other barrier methods are all important factors in staying sexually healthy.

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## How Do You Know If You Have an STI?

While the symptoms of STIs are numerous, many STIs go unnoticed because they are mild, resemble other infections or are asymptomatic—meaning they have no signs or symptoms. Shortly after exposure to an STI, common symptoms include:

- A sore or multiple sores on the genitals or in the oral or rectal areas that may or may not cause pain or discomfort
- Sore and swollen lymph nodes, commonly in the groin area
- Fever or flu-like symptoms
- Painful urination
- Discharge from the penis or the vagina
- Unusual bleeding from the vagina

## How Are STIs Spread?

- STIs are acquired through unprotected vaginal intercourse, skin-to-skin contact with an infected area, oral, and anal sex. The bacteria and viruses that cause and spread STIs can also enter the body through tiny, unnoticeable cuts or tears in the mouth, anus, and genitals. If you do not use condoms, or do not use them

correctly, your risk of contracting an STI increases.

- Having multiple sex partners significantly increases your risk of contracting an STI. Some people don't even know they have an infection because they are symptom free. These people are in great danger of passing an STI to an unsuspecting sexual partner without even realizing it.
- **Protect yourself.** Prevention is the key.

It is easier to prevent STIs than it is to treat them. Therefore, it is important to protect, prevent and seek regular exams and testing.

When you participate in unprotected sexual activity, you increase your susceptibility not only to unintended pregnancy but also to STIs, including HIV.

The only way to completely prevent an STI is to abstain from all types of sexual contact. But if you are going to participate in sexual activities, the best way to reduce the risk of STIs is to limit your sexual partners and practice safe sexual behavior. The safest sexual behavior is having only one partner—someone who is not infected with an STI and who is having sex only with

you. The following strategies can also reduce your chances of getting an STI:

- **Use a barrier method.** Condoms, or “rubbers”, which are to be used during vaginal, anal, and oral intercourse, are the safest and best-known barrier protection against STIs. Squares of latex (dams) made especially for sexual activity (often found in erotica stores) or dental dams (found in some drugstores) should be used for mouth-to-vagina and mouth-to-anus contact.

**Note:** *Douches and the washing of the genitals, anal area and hands before and after sex and in between anal and vaginal contact is good hygiene and may reduce the risk of urinary tract infections, but such cleanliness does not prevent an STI. After you wash, be sure to use a barrier method of protection.*

*Try “outercourse.” You can feel good without having intercourse or participating in sexual activity that requires an exchange of fluids. Touching, stroking, and caressing are low-risk, erotic and fulfilling ways to feel great.*

- **Use protection even if you don't need birth control.** Even if you can't get pregnant—perhaps due to a hysterectomy, tubal ligation, or menopause—you can still get an STI from unprotected sex. You can also contract an STI if you are taking birth control pills or using an IUD or diaphragm.
- **Watch out for blood.** Be careful with sexual activity that involves blood. Even the menstrual blood of an infected person can transmit STIs, including HIV.
- **Get regular exams.** It is crucial for women to have regular gynecological exams and for men to have genital examinations if they are sexually active. Remember, not all STIs have symptoms, and some symptoms are very mild. It is best for clinicians to check and treat STIs when they are in the earliest and most treatable stages. It is important to tell a clinician the truth about your sexual contact(s) and behavior, including types of sex you engage in (oral, vaginal or anal). You should feel free to ask health care providers to check for STIs at any time. Your health care provider can also provide information about the dangers of STIs.

Patients often cite embarrassment or cost as barriers to communicating with

health care providers about sexual health, but you need not avoid treatment for these reasons. The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) enforces the confidentiality of all personal health information, and free or low cost examinations are available. The tests for STIs are usually painless and quick. When the clinician gets the results, he or she will let you know, and if you have an STI the clinician will provide advice on what to do next. If you do have an STI, it is important to seek immediate treatment and tell your partner(s) so that he/she can go to a clinician for testing.

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#### Where to Go for Exams

- General physician
- Nurse practitioner
- Gynecologist
- Local health department
- Planned Parenthood

Your health department and Planned Parenthood offer free or low-cost exams. For more information, visit [www.freemedicalcamps.com](http://www.freemedicalcamps.com).

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#### Can STIs Be Prevented, Treated or Cured?

Bacterial and parasitic STIs can usually be cured with a prescribed antibiotic given orally or through injection. Because not all STIs have symptoms and some symptoms are mild, it is important to visit your health care provider regu-

larly if you are sexually active. You should always visit your clinician at the first sign of symptoms. If you begin treatment early, you will have higher chances of treating or curing the infection successfully. Viral STIs cannot be cured. If an STI cannot be cured, a doctor can help you develop a plan to manage and treat the symptoms.

Certain vaccines can help protect against three viral STIs: hepatitis A, hepatitis B, and HPV. The hepatitis A and B vaccines are given to most babies at birth. If you have not received the hepatitis A and B vaccines, you should talk to your clinician about getting them as soon as possible.

Gardasil® and Cervarix® are the two HPV vaccines licensed by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Both vaccines are given as shots and require three doses.

The HPV vaccine works best when given before sexual activity begins, but the shots can still provide protection when given after sexual contact. If you have not been vaccinated but already have HPV, the vaccine can help protect you from getting a new type of HPV. Both Gardasil and Cervarix also help prevent cervical cancer and precancer in women, but only Gardasil protects against the HPV types that cause most

*If you haven't been safe in the past, this doesn't mean that being safe today won't help you tomorrow and into the future. If you don't have an STI, safer sex will ensure you won't get one. If you do have an STI, safer sex protects your future partners and prevents you from getting another STI.*

genital warts in females and males. Gardasil is recommended for both males and females 9 to 26. The CDC recommends that all girls ages 11 to 12, are vaccinated with three doses of either brand of HPV vaccine to protect against cervical cancer and precancer. Young women ages 13 to 26 should receive either a Gardasil or Cervarix vaccine if they have not already done so.

## Conclusion

Awareness of STIs and how to prevent them contributes to your ability to have a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships as well as pleasurable and safer sexual experiences. It is never too late for safer sex and for preventing STIs to help maintain sexual and overall health. After abstinence, limited sexual partners, proper use of barrier methods, and up-to-date vaccinations are the most effective methods of STI prevention. If you are having sex, visit a clinician

and be honest about your sexual activity. If detected early, most STIs can be treated or cured effectively. If you have an STI, it is your responsibility to inform and protect your partner(s) to prevent further transmission.

Sexual health is much more than being disease-free. Sexual health includes your state of physical, emotional, and social well-being in relation to sexual activity. Examine your values and desires as they pertain to your sexual and intimate relationships, and learn to talk with your partner about your thoughts and feelings. It is important to communicate about sexual health not only before deciding to have sex but on an ongoing basis; talk about your morals and ideals, what sexual behaviors you are okay with, and what methods of protection you are going to use.

## Resources

American Social Health Association, [www.ASHastd.org](http://www.ASHastd.org)  
Family Health Center (Louisville, KY), [www.fhclouisville.org](http://www.fhclouisville.org)  
Hope Center (Lexington, KY), [www.hopectr.org](http://www.hopectr.org)  
Park DuValle Community Health Center (Louisville, KY), [www.pdchc.org](http://www.pdchc.org)  
Planned Parenthood, [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)  
SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States), [www.siecus.org](http://www.siecus.org)

The Kinsey Institute, [www.iub.edu/~kinsey](http://www.iub.edu/~kinsey)  
University Health Services at the University of Kentucky, [www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu/uhs](http://www.ukhealthcare.uky.edu/uhs)  
University of Kentucky Salvation Army Clinic (Lexington, KY), [www.mc.uky.edu/saclinic](http://www.mc.uky.edu/saclinic)

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