

# Information for Teens and Young Adults: Staying Healthy and Preventing STDs



*If you choose to have sex, know how to protect yourself against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).*



## What are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

STDs are diseases that are passed from one person to another through sexual contact. These include chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), syphilis, and HIV. Many of these STDs do not show symptoms for a long time, but they can still be harmful and passed on during sex.

## How are STDs spread?

You can get an STD by having sex (vaginal, anal or oral) with someone who has an STD. Anyone who is sexually active can get an STD. You don't even have to "go all the way" (have anal or vaginal sex) to get an STD, since some STDs, like herpes and HPV, are spread by skin-to-skin contact.

## How common are STDs?

STDs are common, especially among young people. There are about 20 million new cases of STDs each year in the United States, and about half of these are in people between the ages of 15 and 24. Young people are at greater risk of getting an STD for several reasons:

- Young women's bodies are biologically more susceptible to STDs.
- Some young people do not get the recommended STD tests.
- Many young people are hesitant to talk openly and honestly with a doctor or nurse about their sex lives.
- Not having insurance or transportation can make it more difficult for young people to access STD testing.
- Some young people have more than one sex partner.

## What can I do to protect myself?

- The surest way to protect yourself against STDs is to not have sex. That means not having any vaginal, anal, or oral sex ("abstinence"). There are many things to consider before having sex, and it's okay to say "no" if you don't want to have sex.
- If you do decide to have sex, you and your partner should get tested beforehand and make sure that you and your partner use a condom—every time you have oral, anal, or vaginal sex, from start to finish. Know where to get condoms and how to use them correctly. It is not safe to stop using condoms unless you've both been tested, know your status, and are in a mutually monogamous relationship.
- Mutual monogamy means that you and your partner both agree to only have sexual contact with each other. This can help protect against STDs, as long as you've both been tested and know you're STD-free.
- Before you have sex, talk with your partner about how you will prevent STDs and pregnancy. If you think you're ready to have sex, you need to be ready to protect your body and your future. You should also talk to your partner ahead of time about what you will and will not do sexually. Your partner should always respect your right to say no to anything that doesn't feel right.

- Make sure you get the health care you need. Ask a doctor or nurse about STD testing and about vaccines against HPV and hepatitis B.
- Girls and young women may have extra needs to protect their reproductive health. Talk to your doctor or nurse about regular cervical cancer screening and chlamydia testing. You may also want to discuss unintended pregnancy and birth control.
- Avoid using alcohol and drugs. If you use alcohol and drugs, you are more likely to take risks, like not using a condom or having sex with someone you normally wouldn't have sex with.

### **If I get an STD, how will I know?**

Many STDs don't cause any symptoms that you would notice, so the only way to know for sure if you have an STD is to get tested. You can get an STD from having sex with someone who has no symptoms. Just like you, that person might not even know he or she has an STD.

### **Where can I get tested?**

There are places that offer teen-friendly, confidential, and free STD tests. This means that no one has to find out you've been tested. Visit [FindSTDTest.org](http://FindSTDTest.org) to find an STD testing location near you.

### **Can STDs be treated?**

Your doctor can prescribe medicines to cure some STDs, like chlamydia and gonorrhea. Other STDs, like herpes, can't be cured, but you can take medicine to help with the symptoms.

If you are ever treated for an STD, be sure to finish all of your medicine, even if you feel better before you finish it all. Ask the doctor or nurse about testing and treatment for your partner, too. You and your partner should avoid having sex until you've both been treated. Otherwise, you may continue to pass the STD back and forth. It is possible to get an STD again (after you've been treated), if you have sex with someone who has an STD.

### **What happens if I don't treat an STD?**

Some curable STDs can be dangerous if they aren't treated. For example, if left untreated, chlamydia and gonorrhea can make it difficult—or even impossible—for a woman to get pregnant. You also increase your chances of getting HIV if you have an untreated STD. Some STDs, like HIV, can be fatal if left untreated.

### **What if my partner or I have an incurable STD?**

Some STDs—like herpes and HIV—aren't curable, but a doctor can prescribe medicine to treat the symptoms.

If you are living with an STD, it's important to tell your partner before you have sex. Although it may be uncomfortable to talk about your STD, open and honest conversation can help your partner make informed decisions to protect his or her health.

### **If I have questions, who can answer them?**

If you have questions, talk to a parent or other trusted adult. Don't be afraid to be open and honest with them about your concerns. If you're ever confused or need advice, they're the first place to start. Remember, they were young once, too.

Talking about sex with a parent or another adult doesn't need to be a one-time conversation. It's best to leave the door open for conversations in the future.

It's also important to talk honestly with a doctor or nurse. Ask which STD tests and vaccines they recommend for you.

### **Where can I get more information?**

CDC  
How You Can Prevent Sexually Transmitted Diseases  
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/prevention/>

Teen Pregnancy  
<http://www.cdc.gov/TeenPregnancy/Teens.html>

CDC-INFO Contact Center  
1-800-CDC-INFO  
(1-800-232-4636)  
Contact <http://wwwn.cdc.gov/dcs/RequestForm.aspx>

HealthFinder.gov  
STD Testing: Conversation Starters  
<http://healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/health-conditions-and-diseases/hiv-and-other-stds/std-testing-conversation-starters>

American Sexual Health Association  
Sexual Health and You  
<http://www.iwannaknow.org/teens/index.html>

Teens and Young Adults  
<http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/sexual-health/teens-and-young-adults/>

References  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Incidence, Prevalence, and Cost of Sexually Transmitted Infections in the United States, <http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/sti-estimates-fact-sheet-feb-2013.pdf>. Accessed October 14, 2014.