

About Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)

Sexually transmitted diseases - also known as STDs and once called venereal diseases or VD - are infectious diseases that spread from person to person through intimate contact. STDs affect guys and girls of all ages and backgrounds who are having sex - it doesn't matter if they're rich or poor.

STDs are becoming more and more common: By the age of 21, almost one in five Americans requires treatment for an STD. Because teens are more at risk for getting some STDs, it's important to learn what you can do to protect yourself.

STDs are more than just an embarrassment. They're a serious health problem. If they're not treated, some STDs can cause permanent damage, such as infertility (the inability to have a baby) and even death (HIV/AIDS is one of the STDs that's on the rise in teens).

How STDs Spread

One reason STDs spread is because people think they need to have sexual intercourse to become infected. That's wrong. A person can get some STDs, like herpes or genital warts, through skin-to-skin contact with an infected area or sore. Another myth about STDs is that you can't get them if you have oral or anal sex. That's also wrong because the viruses or bacteria that cause STDs can enter the body through tiny cuts or tears in the mouth and anus, as well as the genitals.

STDs also spread easily because you can't tell whether someone has an infection. In fact, some people with STDs don't even know that they have them. These people are in danger of passing an infection on to their sex partners without even realizing it.

Some of the things that increase a person's chances of getting an STD are:

- Sexual activity at a young age. The younger a person starts having sex, the greater his or her chances of becoming infected with an STD.
- Lots of sex partners. People who have sexual contact - not just intercourse, but any form of intimate activity - with many different partners are more at risk than people who stay with the same partner.
- Unprotected sex. Latex condoms are the only form of birth control that lessen your risk of contracting an STD. Spermicides, diaphragms, and other birth control methods may help prevent pregnancy, but they don't protect a person against STDs.

Preventing and Treating STDs

As with many other diseases, prevention is key. It's much easier to prevent STDs than treat them. The only way to completely prevent STDs is to abstain from all types of sexual contact.

People who are considering becoming sexually active should get regular gynecological or male genital examinations. There are two reasons for this. First, these exams give doctors a chance to teach people about STDs and protecting themselves. And second, regular exams give doctors more opportunities to check for STDs while they're still in their earliest, most treatable, stage.

Don't let embarrassment at the thought of having an STD keep you from seeking medical attention. Waiting to see a doctor may allow a disease to progress and cause more damage. If you think you may have an STD, or if you have had a partner who may have an STD, you should see a doctor right away.

If you don't have a doctor or prefer not to see your family doctor, you may be able to find a local clinic in your area where you can get an exam confidentially. Some national and local organizations operate STD hotlines staffed by trained specialists who can answer your questions and provide referrals. Calls to these hotlines are confidential. One hotline you can call for information is the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) National STD Hotline at 1-800-227-8922.

