

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are passed from person to person during sex – vaginal, anal, or oral - through blood, body fluids, or skin in the genital area. They are very common. But the good news is there are ways to protect each other and ourselves from STIs. It's called safer sex, and here are some suggestions for what you can do.

Get Immunized

Vaccines are a safe and effective way to prevent Hepatitis A and B, and HPV (human papillomavirus). It's best to get your vaccines *before* you start to have sex, but if you already have had sex, it's not too late. Talk to your doctor or nurse about the vaccines that are right for you.

Consider Abstinence

The best way to avoid STIs is to not have sex of any kind. This is called abstinence.

Talk to your Partner(s)

Speak honestly and openly with your partner(s) about STIs and prevention *before you have sex*. Your partner's sexual history is as important as your own.

Limit Sex Partners

The more partners you or your partners have, the higher your risk of getting an STI. One way to reduce your risk is called mutual monogamy. This is when 2 people agree to have sex with only each other. If you and your partner have never had sex of any kind with another person, there is no risk of STIs. If you or your partner has ever had sex with anyone else, get tested before you have sex with each other.

Get Yourself Tested

The only way to know if you or your partner has an STI is to get tested. You can't tell if others are infected by how they look. Get tested and ask your sex partner(s) to get tested *before* having sex. Know that some infections may take several months to show up on a test, so you may need to retest.

Talk to your doctor or nurse about your sex life and the types of testing that are right for you.

Understand Safe, Safer and Unsafe Activities

- **Safe** activities don't spread STIs. Abstinence, fantasy, masturbation, sexy talk, online sex, phone sex and non-sexual massage are all safe.
- **Safer** activities have some risk of spreading STIs. These include open mouth kissing, hand-to-genital contact, body-to-body rubbing ("outercourse"), oral sex, or playing with sex toys with a partner.
- **Unsafe** activities have the highest risk of spreading STIs. High-risk activities include vaginal sex and anal sex. Other unsafe activities include sharing needles, exchanging sex for drugs or money, and sex with an infected partner. Having an STI also increases your risk of getting other STIs.

Use Protection

Barriers prevent contact with blood or body fluids. Condoms and dental dams can reduce the risk of STIs, if used correctly and every time.

Use dental dams during oral sex. Dams are small pieces of latex or silicone that you put on the outside of the vagina or anus. They prevent passing of sexual fluids between you and your partner during oral sex. For oral sex with a penis, it is best to use an unlubricated condom. Dental dams do not prevent pregnancy.

Take PrEP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis)

PrEP is medicine that is used to reduce the risk of getting HIV in people at highest risk. Your doctor or nurse can give you more information about PrEP.

Be in control.

Don't let alcohol, drugs or a partner make you forget how to protect yourself. Alcohol and drug use can make it harder to make good decisions and safer sex less likely to happen.