

Sexually Transmitted Infections

Sex Facts – Warts and all

There are at least 25 different types of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including, Herpes, syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia and genital warts. It was recently revealed that there has been a 57 per cent rise in cases of STIs in the UK since 1995. Yet, despite this, there is still widespread ignorance about what these infections do, how to spot them and what the treatments are. So we're laying the facts bare with this essential guide.

Chlamydia

It's now Britain's most common STI with cases tripling since 1995 to 90,000 a year.

Symptoms: Fifty per cent of men and 70 per cent of women with the infection don't have any. If symptoms do occur, they start one to three weeks after infection and often disappear after a few days. Women may experience yellowish vaginal discharge, bleeding between periods, pain on urination and pain or bleeding during sex. For men, discharge from the penis, pain on urination and a burning/itching sensation in the genital area are the most common symptoms.

The long-term effects: One third of untreated women with chlamydia will develop pelvic inflammatory disease, which is hard to treat and can lead to chronic pain, infertility and ectopic pregnancy (pregnancy outside the womb). If men don't get treated, it can lead to testicle infections and infertility.

Testing and treatment: It is diagnosed from a urine sample or swab from the vagina or penis. Tests can be done at your local GUM (genito-urinary medicine) clinic, details of which can be found in directory enquiries. The treatment is a simple course of antibiotics.

Gonorrhoea

While cases of gonorrhoea fell slightly last year, they have more than doubled since 1995.

Symptoms: Early on, they are often mild or non-existent. Men are more likely than women to show any and they typically occur two to ten days after infection and include discharge from the penis and severe burning on urination. For women, early symptoms include a yellowish or bloody vaginal discharge and a burning sensation on urination. Men and women with rectal infections may experience discharge from the anus and anal discomfort.

The long-term effects: Gonorrhoea is particularly bad for women if left untreated, often leading to pelvic inflammatory disease as in chlamydia. For men, complications can lead to infertility. The infection can also spread to the bloodstream in both sexes and cause infection of the heart and joints but this is rare.

Testing and treatment: A swab from the penis or the cervix is usually sufficient for diagnosis. It can often be treated with a single dose of antibiotics, but there are many strains of gonorrhoea and some are resistant to common antibiotics.

Genital Herpes

Cases of genital herpes showed a slight decline last year after being on the increase for the past decade.

The symptoms: These vary from none through to itching, tingling or pain in the genital area, followed by blisters or sores. In women, herpes occurs on the vulva, vagina or around the bottom. In men, it may occur around the genitals, anus or buttocks.

The long-term effects: If untreated, genital herpes symptoms can recur with varying degrees of severity and frequency. It will not affect a women's ability to become pregnant but it can increase the risk of miscarriage.



Testing and treatment: As a swab from sores is usually needed, diagnosis in those showing no symptoms is difficult. Anyone who develops genital blisters should immediately have a test at a GUM clinic. Herpes is a virus and there is no cure – infection is lifelong. Anti-viral drugs, however, can reduce the length and severity of recurrences.

Genital warts

More than 70,000 people endured genital warts in 2003 – a quarter more than in 1995. (Most recent data available).

The symptoms: While some people have no visible sign of infection, many develop warts. For women, these occur on the inside and outside of the vagina, on the cervix or around the anus. In men, they occur on the tip or shaft of the penis or around the anus.

The long-term effects: Left untreated, warts can develop into fleshy cauliflower-like growths. They usually disappear if left alone, although this can take years. Among certain female cases, they can increase the risk of cervical cancer.

Testing and treatment: Diagnosis is possible from a visual inspection at a GUM clinic. Warts are caused by a virus and there is no immediate cure, although the application of chemicals, such as liquid nitrogen is often effective.

Syphilis

In 1995, cases of syphilis barely exceeded 150. They have since increased by a factor of ten.

Symptoms: There can be none initially, although it usually begins with one or more painless but highly infectious sores anywhere on the body. While these clear up on their own within six weeks, their absence does not mean an end to infection.

The long-term effects: Syphilis is a three-stage infection. Stage one is outlined above. If the illness is left untreated, it moves on to a secondary stage which often results in a rash on the palms or soles. Stage three occurs four or more years after infection and can cause serious problems, from heart and respiratory complications through to dementia – indeed, Henry VIII is believed to have suffered from stage three syphilis for much of his adult life. Infectious syphilis in pregnant women can often result in miscarriage, stillbirth or an infected baby.

Testing and treatment: It can be diagnosed from a swab from stage-one sores or a blood test. All stages of the infection can be treated with a course of antibiotics.

Useful contacts

Family Planning Association

National Helpline: 0845 310 1334

Website: www.fpa.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust

THT Helpline: 0845 12 21 200

(Mon-Fri 10am to 10pm, Sat-Sun, 12noon to 6pm)

Website: www.tht.org.uk

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This factsheet has been produced by Women's Health Concern and reviewed by members of our Medical Advisory Panel.

It is for your information and advice and should be used in consultation with your own medical practitioner. **Updated: November 2007.**