

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

What are sexually transmitted diseases?

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are infections that are spread from person to person through sexual contact. These infections are often spread through blood, semen, urine, and vaginal fluids. Many STDs can be cured or managed if treated early. If not treated early, some STDs can cause severe and permanent damage, including blindness, sterility, heart disease, or even death. Examples of a few STDs include gonorrhea, HIV/AIDS, syphilis, chlamydia, and genital herpes.

Are people under the influence of drugs at higher risk for STDs?

Research has shown that people addicted to alcohol or other drugs are more likely than the general population to contract HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS). This is because alcohol and drug addiction is often associated with high-risk sexual behaviors and can be associated with injection drug use, which are two major modes of HIV transmission.

A history of heavy alcohol use has been correlated with a lifetime tendency toward high-risk sexual behaviors, including multiple sex partners, unprotected intercourse, sex with high-risk partners (such as injection drug users or prostitutes), and the exchange of sex for money or drugs. Alcohol acts directly on the brain, reducing inhibitions and diminishing risk perception.

Why are adolescents and young adults at higher risk for STDs?

Adolescents and young adults are more likely than older adults to engage in unprotected sexual intercourse. They are also more likely to select partners who are at higher risk for STDs. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), females fifteen to nineteen years old have the highest rates of gonorrhea, while twenty- to twenty-four-year-olds have the highest rate of primary and secondary syphilis.

Substance use among adolescents is associated with early sexual activity, an important factor in the prevalence of STDs and HIV infection. The use of substances combined with sexual activity significantly decreases the likelihood that a condom will be used during sex. Substance use also can decrease an individual's discrimination in choosing sex partners and can increase the number

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of partners and the likelihood of risky sexual practices (including anal intercourse), thereby heightening the risk of STDs

How can you lower your risk for STDs?

One way is to stay clean and sober. A relapse could put you in a position to engage in high-risk behaviors that could result in an STD. Another important way you can lower your risk is to limit your number of sex partners. The more partners you have, the higher the risk for becoming infected. If you do have regular sexual contact, consider following these guidelines to lower your risk:

Guidelines for Lowering Your STD Risk

- Stay clean and sober. Be aware that a relapse could put you in a position to engage in high-risk behaviors.
- Don't ever share needles, syringes, or other equipment ("works") for any use. STDs from an infected person can stay in a needle and then be injected directly into the next person who uses the needle.
- Abstain from sexual intercourse, or engage in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested for STDs, including the HIV virus. (The more sex partners you have, the greater your chances of getting diseases passed through sex.)
- If your sexual behaviors place you at risk for STDs, correct and consistent use of the male latex condom can reduce the risk of transmission of some STDs. However, no protective method is 100 percent effective, and condom use cannot guarantee absolute protection against any STD.
- Don't share razors or toothbrushes because of the possibility of contact with blood.

Where can you get more STD information or counseling?

To find out where to go in your area for STD counseling and testing, contact your local health department or the CDC National AIDS Hotline.

For more information about STD education and prevention, contact the American Red Cross.