

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI)

What are STIs and what is the relation with HIV?

Sexually transmitted infections are infections that are passed from person to person by sexual contact (vaginal, anal or oral). These infections range from mild, easily treatable irritations to serious diseases that can cause infertility and even lead to death.

The presence of STIs, especially those that have open sores, increases the risk of acquiring and transmitting HIV in both men and women.

Women are more vulnerable for STI and HIV transmission than men because of their physical characteristics: a larger surface for exposure, a good breeding ground for infection inside the body and a higher concentration of HIV in semen than in vaginal and cervical fluids.

What are common STIs and their symptoms?

Chlamydia: an infection that affects the genitals. It is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections. Most women have no symptoms. It can be treated simply with antibiotics, once diagnosed.

Gonorrhea: is caused by bacteria and often has no symptoms. It is very infectious. It can also be passed on to babies during birth, causing eye infections and blindness. To diagnose gonorrhea a swab is taken from the cervix, urethra or the throat. Treatment is usually with antibiotics.

Syphilis: Syphilis is a bacterial infection. It is usually sexually transmitted, but can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn baby. The signs and symptoms are the same in both men and women and usually a sore appears on the penis or vagina, anus or mouth about ten days to three weeks after sex with an infected person. The sore disappears in a week or two but the bacteria remain in the body. However, most women do not see the sore and may not have any symptoms.

The only way to be sure is to have a blood test. During the secondary stage which may occur during the next two years, a rash may appear on the hands and feet, the face and other parts of the body. Treatment at any time during these first two stages of syphilis will cure the infection. But if it is left untreated, a later stage will occur some years later which will cause very serious damage to a person's health.

Chancroid: is a bacterial infection which is common in tropical countries. It causes painful ulcers on the genitals. Chancroid can be identified by a laboratory test and cured with antibiotics.

Genital herpes: Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV). It causes painful tingling or itching blisters or ulcers. Some people have aching muscles and fever. Herpes Type I causes sores around the nose and mouth. Herpes Type II causes sores or blisters around the genital and anal area. Herpes is passed on through direct contact with the infected part of the person's body.

Genital warts: Genital warts are small pinkish/white fleshy growths which may appear anywhere in the genital or anal area. They are caused by a virus. Women with untreated genital warts may be at increased risk of developing genital cancers. Warts are spread through skin to skin contact. After being infected with the wart virus, it usually takes between one to three months for warts to appear on the genitals of women and men. They may itch but are usually painless. The most common treatment is to paint them with chemicals, which can be done either by the doctor or by the person him/herself.

Hepatitis B and C: Hepatitis means inflammation of the liver. There is a distinction between acute hepatitis (recovery through rest) and chronic hepatitis which may make people infectious for life and may lead to a long term liver disease. Hepatitis B and C are extremely infectious. It is an STI, but is also transmitted by contaminated blood products, using needles contaminated with blood and needle sharing. In Pakistan, among IDU, hepatitis B and C are extremely common and indicate unsafe

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injecting practices as well as unsafe sexual behaviour. This means that HIV, once introduced in the IDU community, may easily become very widespread.

HIV: is the only STI that cannot be cured, although its manifestations can be treated (see fact sheet 1 and 8).

Treatment of STIs

Most common symptoms and signs can be grouped into 'syndromes' for which the causes and treatment are well known. In Pakistan, STIs are treated with a syndromic approach. This means that no specific diagnosis and laboratory test need to be done, but certain signs and symptoms get treated by specific drugs. These may be antibiotics or other drugs. But it is always necessary to seek medical advice and treatment.

In Pakistan, there is a proliferation of informal sexual health centers which are visited mainly by male clients. The accessibility of these centers is much higher than that of medical clinics, while stigma and confidentiality is much less of an issue. However, the quality of treatment may not be very good. For instance, patients may not be explained that they have to take the full course of antibiotics or diagnosis may not be correct.

What can programmes do to prevent STIs?

- There is a stigma and confidentiality issue attached to STIs which make men and especially women refrain from seeking treatment in public health care. Also specific STI clinics (apart from the informal ones described above) have a stigma attached to it. One way of changing this, may be integration of STI services into sexual and reproductive health and family planning services.
- Lack of information and education on STIs causes low awareness about STIs and this, coupled to the fact that many people are a-symptomatic, means that many STIs go untreated and increase the vulnerability for HIV transmission. Education on STIs needs to be integrated in health (and sexual)

education and in reproductive health services.

- Youth friendly sexual and reproductive health services are needed where adolescents can come for information, education and treatment. Best is to develop such services with the participation of youth themselves
- Staff of clinics that offer STI treatment have to be educated in communication and counseling and have to be made aware of the impact of their own attitude to those who seek their services.

Prevention of STIs

Like HIV, STI transmission can be prevented by abstinence, being faithful to one partner, safe sex (condoms), negotiation skills and by safe needle use practices in case of Hepatitis B and C (see fact sheet 1).