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Sexually Transmitted Infections or Diseases (STIs or STDs)

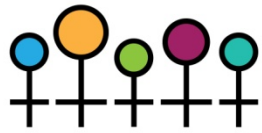
Last updated: June 27, 2025

Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

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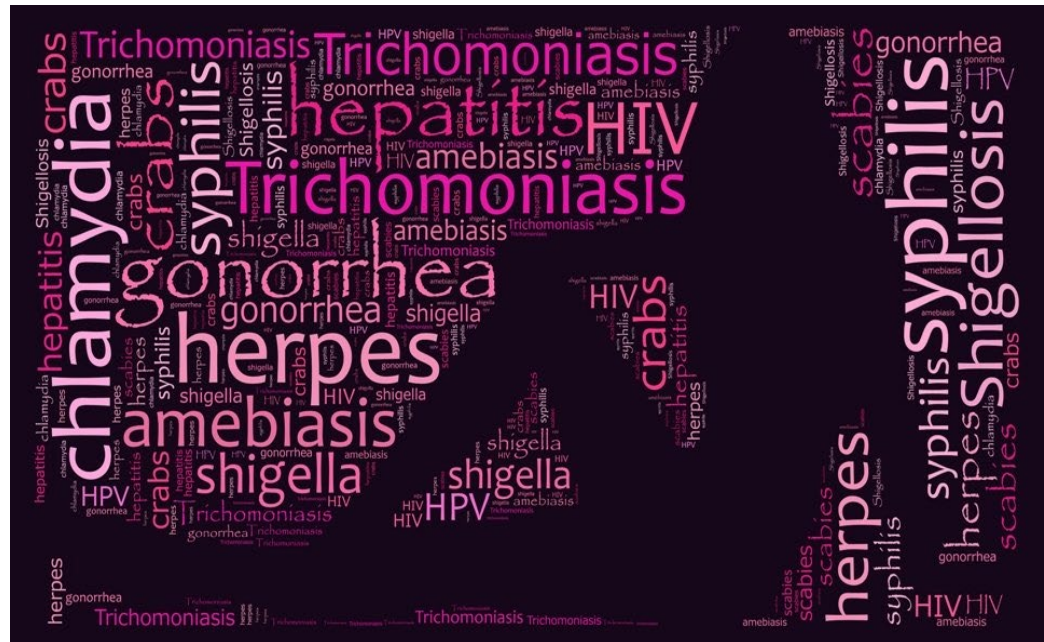


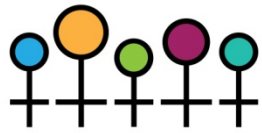
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The Basics

Sexually transmitted infections: Infections passed from person to person ***through sexual contact***

- HIV is an STI
- More than 25 STIs mainly spread by vaginal, anal, and oral sex

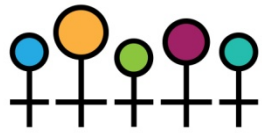




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The Basics

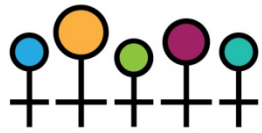
- World Health Organization (WHO): more than 1 million STIs acquired every day worldwide
- STIs are similar to, but not the same as, STDs
 - Most people with STIs do not have any symptoms
 - Often don't know they can pass infection on
 - Left untreated, STIs can cause serious problems:
 - Cervical cancer
 - Liver disease
 - Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)
 - Infertility
 - Pregnancy problems



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The Basics

- Having some STIs can increase risk of acquiring HIV if you are HIV-negative and get exposed to HIV:
 - Chancroid
 - Herpes
 - Syphilis
 - Trichomoniasis
- People living with HIV may also be ***at greater risk*** of getting or passing on other STIs
- People living with HIV often ***experience more serious problems*** if/when they get STIs

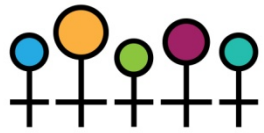


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The Basics

US has ***highest rate of STIs in resource-rich world***

- About 26 million new infections in 2018
- Almost half among young people (15-24 years old)
 - more at risk for STIs than older adults because:
 - Young people's cervical cells more vulnerable to STIs
 - Teenagers, young adults may have problems getting information, services, supplies they need to avoid STIs
 - May have trouble getting STI prevention services
 - May not feel comfortable in places designed for adults
 - May have concerns about confidentiality



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The Basics

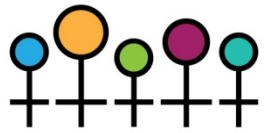
Teenage girls and women of color have some of the highest rates of STIs – especially chlamydia, gonorrhea

- Several factors:

- Higher rates of poverty
- Less access to health care
- Already high rate of STIs in communities of color



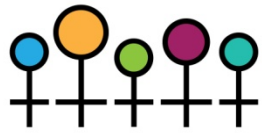
- Increases risk of getting an STI each time a woman has sex
- Sexual partner in community is more likely to have an STI



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The Basics

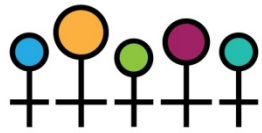
- Regardless of race or age, ***less than half of those who should be tested for STIs*** receive screening
 - Especially important for women
 - More frequent/serious complications from STIs than men
- STIs without symptoms can still be transmitted
 - Many people who have an STI do not know it
 - Only way to know for sure is regular STI screenings
- STIs can be ***prevented by practicing safer sex***
- STIs can be ***cured or managed with treatment***



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The Basics

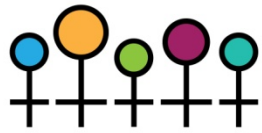
- Many people with STIs ***have no or symptoms***
 - When there are signs of STIs, likely to be in genital area
 - For cisgender women, this includes:
 - **Vulva** (area around vagina including lips)
 - **Vagina** (opening where menstrual blood comes out)
 - **Buttocks**
 - **Urethra** (opening above vagina where urine comes out)
 - **Anus** (opening where bowel movement – “poop” – comes out)
 - For cisgender men, this includes:
 - **Penis**
 - **Scrotum** (“balls”)
 - **Urethra** (tube through which urine passes through penis)
 - **Anus**



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Chlamydia

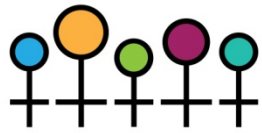
- Among ***most common STIs***
- Caused by bacterium in genital tract
 - Including vaginal secretions, semen
 - Also infections in throat and rectum (“butt”)
- Can be spread by:
 - Vaginal, oral, or anal sex without a barrier
 - Pregnant people can pass it on to babies during delivery
- Symptoms may include:
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Burning during urination



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Chlamydia

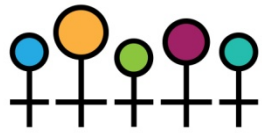
- Can be successfully treated with antibiotics
 - Left untreated, can spread to ovaries and fallopian tubes, cause **pelvic inflammatory disease (PID)**
 - PID can lead to infertility, make it difficult to become pregnant
 - Can cause infection in butt (rectal pain, discharge, bleeding)
- Yearly screening recommended by CDC for:
 - All sexually active women under 25
 - Older women with new or multiple sex partners
 - Recent reports show fewer than half of sexually active women under 25 are screened
 - Ask for test, if not offered by provider
- If treated, partner must be treated, too



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Genital Warts

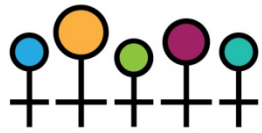
- Caused by viruses
 - **HPV** (Human Papillomavirus) is large group of viruses
 - Certain types of HPV cause infections in genital area
 - Genital warts, cancer of cervix, vulva, vagina, anus, penis
- Genital HPV is spread easily:
 - Skin-to-skin contact during vaginal, oral, or anal sex
 - Condoms do not entirely prevent transmission
 - People living with HIV ***more likely to have HPV, develop genital warts, cervical or anal cancer***



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Genital Warts

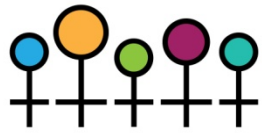
- Important to find HPV early and get treatment to prevent health problems
- Also ***three effective HPV vaccines***
 - # of girls with HPV has dropped significantly
- Best to get vaccinated before ever having sex (before being exposed to HPV)
 - Vaccines may not help people already infected
 - But vaccines may protect against different HPV strains
- Recommendation: people living with HIV be vaccinated up to age 45.



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Gonorrhea (“The Clap”)

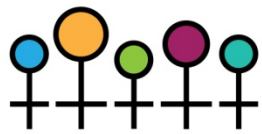
- Caused by bacterium in vaginal secretions, semen
- Can be spread by:
 - Vaginal, anal, oral sex without condom or latex/polyurethane barrier
- Symptoms may include:
 - Yellowish or greenish vaginal discharge
 - Burning feeling when urinating
 - Pain, discharge, bleeding in butt
 - Itchy or persistent sore throat
- Can be treated with antibiotics
 - Left untreated, can cause PID, infertility
 - Request test if not offered by provider
- If treated, partner must be treated, too



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Herpes

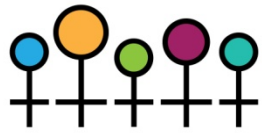
- Caused by a virus in nerves; two common types
 - *Herpes simplex type 1* causes cold sores around mouth
 - *Herpes simplex type 2* causes sores in genital area
 - Possible to get HSV-2 in mouth, HSV-1 in genital area
- Symptoms include itchy or painful blisters
- Spread through skin-to-skin contact with sores
 - May also spread even before sores can be seen
 - In most people, sores come and go; virus stays in body for life



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Herpes

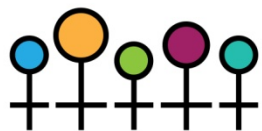
- Sometimes no symptoms; virus "hiding" in nerves
 - Some women living with HIV never had blisters or sores before acquiring HIV; surprised by "outbreak" of sores
 - Women living with HIV may have more frequent difficult to treat outbreaks
- No cure; antiviral drugs can:
 - Reduce # of outbreaks if taken daily
 - Shorten and ease outbreaks if taken when symptoms begin
 - Valtrex also shown to lower transmission risk
- Pregnant people can transmit herpes to babies
 - Tell your provider if you have genital herpes and are pregnant or planning pregnancy



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HIV

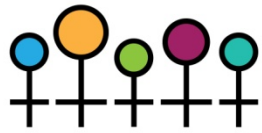
- HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**
 - Virus that causes AIDS
- Is in blood, vaginal secretions, semen, breast milk
- Can be spread through vaginal, oral, or anal sex without condom or treatment-as-prevention method
- Getting tested for HIV is part of routine, regular health care in many countries
- Different testing recommendations for different areas of the world



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HIV

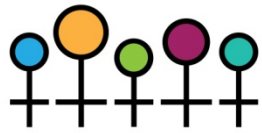
- Important that you get tested if you:
 - Have ever had vaginal, anal, or oral sex without a condom
 - Have shared needles, syringes to inject drugs, other substances
 - Are uncertain of partner's HIV status; have a partner living with HIV
 - Are pregnant or are considering becoming pregnant
 - Have ever been diagnosed with an STI or STD
 - Have hepatitis C
 - Begin treatment for tuberculosis (TB)
- HIV drugs
 - Help people living with HIV stay well
 - Can prevent people from acquiring HIV (PrEP)
- Cannot transmit if undetectable viral load (U=U)



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Syphilis

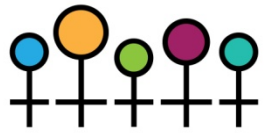
- Caused by bacterium
- Can be spread by:
 - Vaginal, anal, or oral sex without condom or other barrier
- Has several phases:
 - **Primary syphilis** (early disease): pain-free open sores (**chancres**) in genital or anal area or around mouth
 - Usually heal on their own in 3-6 weeks
 - **Secondary syphilis** (later stage): rash and/or hair loss



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Syphilis

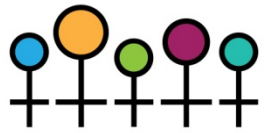
- Can be successfully treated with antibiotics
- Left untreated, can proceed to latent stage
 - No symptoms, but damage to heart, brain, eyes, etc.
- Longer-term: neurosyphilis
 - In brain or spinal cord -> can cause dementia, strokes
- Pregnant people can pass syphilis to their babies during pregnancy and childbirth
 - Important that pregnant people get tested for syphilis
- If treated, partner must be treated, too



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Other STIs to Know About

- Chancroid
- Hepatitis
- Pubic Lice (“Crabs”)
- Trichomoniasis



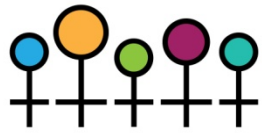
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Chancroid

- Caused by bacterium
- Symptoms may include:
 - Genital sores
 - Vaginal discharge
 - Burning feeling when urinating
 - Swollen lymph nodes in groin
- Can be spread by:
 - Vaginal or anal sex
 - Skin-to-skin contact with sores
- Can be treated with antibiotics



Credit: Medicinenet.com



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Hepatitis

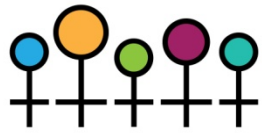
- Inflammation (irritation) of liver
- Some types of hepatitis caused by viruses in blood, vaginal secretions, semen, breast milk
 - Hepatitis B (HBV), C (HCV) can be sexually transmitted
 - Can become chronic (long-term), very serious
 - May have no symptoms
- Vaccine to prevent HBV
- Cure for HCV
- People living with HIV should be tested and treated for HBV, HCV

Pubic Lice (“Crabs”)

- Live in pubic hair (hair around genitals)
- Can be transmitted by:
 - Skin-to-skin contact
 - Infected clothes and bedding
- Symptoms may include:
 - Intense itching
 - Seeing lice or eggs in hair
- Can be treated with over-the-counter medications
 - Pregnant people must use products designed just for them
 - Wash contaminated clothes, linen in hot water, laundry soap



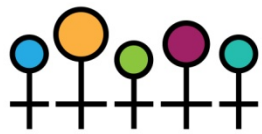
Credit: Jennifer2016 on Glogster



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Trichomoniasis

- Caused by **protozoa** (single-celled germ)
- Can be spread during vaginal, oral, or anal sex without a condom or latex/polyurethane barrier
 - Common cause of vaginal infections
- Symptoms may include:
 - Foamy, foul-smelling vaginal discharge
 - Itching
 - Sometimes there are no symptoms at all
- Can be successfully treated with antibiotics
 - Sexual partner must also be treated

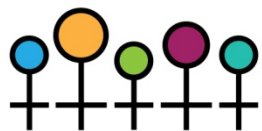


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Protecting Yourself and Others

You can ***greatly reduce risk*** of getting many STIs:

- Use a latex or plastic condom for vaginal and anal sex
 - Female condom can also prevent many STIs
 - Use condoms without lubricant for oral sex on a man
- Use latex or plastic barriers (dental dams, plastic wrap) for oral sex on a woman or for oral-anal sex; use latex or plastic gloves if you have cuts or sores on your hands
- Use water-based lubricants with latex barriers
- DO NOT use oil-based products
- Do not use lubricants or condoms that contain nonoxynol-9 (N-9)



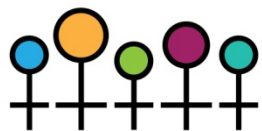
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Protecting Yourself and Others

- Wash shared sex toys or use fresh condom between users
- Use a latex condom with methods of birth control that do not protect you from STIs
- Talk with your sex partner(s) about STIs and condoms
- Talk honestly with your provider, sex partner(s), about any STIs you or your partner has or has had
- Have regular pelvic exams, cervical cancer screenings
- Talk to your provider about having a routine STI screening
- DoxyPEP has been shown to prevent bacterial STIs
- Do not share needles or syringes for injecting drugs or other substances
 - If you do share drug equipment, clean your works

The Bottom Line

- There are many STIs, including HIV
- Some can be cured; many can be managed
 - Many can cause serious health and fertility problems or even death if untreated
 - If needed, get treatment your provider recommends
 - Even if symptoms go away, still need to finish treatment
 - Make sure your partner(s) gets treated, so that you do not pass an infection back and forth



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Learn More!

- To learn more about this topic, and for links to articles featuring more details, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
 - Fact sheet: [Sexually Transmitted Infections or Diseases \(STIs or STDs\)](#)
- For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV:
 - www.thewellproject.org
 - [@thewellprojecthiv.bsky.social](https://bsky.app/@thewellprojecthiv)
 - www.facebook.com/thewellproject
 - www.instagram.com/thewellprojecthiv/
 - www.threads.net/@thewellprojecthiv
 - www.youtube.com/thewellprojecthiv