

# Patients' Guide to Women and STIs

# *What is an STI?*

A sexually transmitted infection (STI) is an infection passed from person to person through sexual contact, either through infected body fluids or direct contact.

Anyone, male or female, who has had sex or is sexually active may be at risk of an STI.

## *What are the signs and symptoms of common STIs in women?*

**Many women with STI show no symptoms.** Nonetheless, the STI still needs to be treated as soon as possible. If one does experience symptoms, they may appear as the following:

- Thicker, yellow/greenish or blood-stained discharge from the vagina
- Itching, swelling, or redness in the vagina/vulva
- Pain in the vagina/vulva during sex
- Abnormal bleeding after sex
- Pain while urinating or increased frequency of urination
- Broken skin, abnormal growths or ulcers in the genital areas
- Pain the lower abdomen

Please see a doctor as soon as possible if you:

- have any symptoms, or
- have no symptoms but are sexually active, or
- feel you may have been exposed to an STI.

## *Common STIs Among Women*

### **Chlamydia & Gonorrhoea**

- Both are bacterial infections that may cause heavier yellowish discharge and/or abnormal bleeding from the genitals.
- Both infections often do not cause noticeable symptoms at all.
- If untreated, they may lead to pelvic infection, infertility or a spread in the blood to cause a more serious illness.
- Gonorrhoea and chlamydia can be treated with antibiotics.

## Trichomoniasis

- Trichomoniasis is caused by protozoan, or small organism, that is transmitted via sex.
- Women with trichomoniasis may have no symptoms or may have changes in the vaginal discharge or itching.
- Trichomoniasis can be treated with antibiotics. If untreated, the cervix may become inflamed and it may also cause pregnancy complications.

## Genital Herpes

- Genital herpes is a viral infection caused by the Herpes simplex virus type 1 or 2
- Painful blisters and ulcers may form on the vaginal area, external genitals, anus or cervix. Type 1 also causes cold sores on the lips.
- The outbreak usually lasts within 1-3 weeks.
- Genital herpes can recur but frequent episodes can be suppressed with antiviral drugs.
- Unless one has symptoms of herpes, it is **not** usually tested for.

## Genital Warts

- Genital warts are a viral infection caused by the Human Papillomavirus (HPV).
- Women with HPV may experience small growths on the skin, which can increase in size and number. Some infections may also lead to cervical cancers.
- Warts can be treated with liquid nitrogen, medicated solutions or creams. Severe cases may need surgery for removal. Repeat treatment may be necessary for recurrent warts, which is common.
- A vaccine is available to prevent HPV infection (warts and cervical cancer).
- Women are advised to go through regular pap smears (every 3 years from the age of 25) to detect early signs of cancer.

## Syphilis

- Syphilis is a bacterial infection that can cause infected women to have certain symptoms, depending on the stage of the infection.
- Often, syphilis has no symptoms and can only be detected on a blood test. However, if symptoms appear, women may experience:

Primary Stage	Secondary Stage	Tertiary Stage
Painless ulcer on vagina, vulva, and/or anal region	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rashes on palms, soles, and body</li> <li>• Mouth ulcers</li> <li>• Hair loss</li> </ul>	Damage to bones, joints, blood vessels, and organs

- Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics, such as penicillin injections.

## Hepatitis B

- Hepatitis B is a viral infection of the liver which is passed through infected blood and sexual body fluids.
- Symptoms may include a flu-like illness with jaundice, but in some cases, no symptoms will appear at all. A small percentage of infected individuals may develop liver disease.
- Most people recover fully from the infection although some may become long-term carriers of the virus and infect sexual partners.
- A vaccine is available to protect individuals against the infection.

## HIV

- HIV is the virus that causes AIDS and can be passed through infected blood and sexual body fluids.
- Initially, HIV infection may cause no symptoms at all. However, some may experience a flu-like illness with fever, rash, swollen neck and armpit glands. These symptoms may progress to fever, weight loss, diarrhoea, night sweats, and oral thrush.
- Other skin infections may appear before a more serious illness and AIDS begin.
- Anti-HIV medications are available to control the infection and early treatment helps keep infected individuals healthy while preventing AIDS.

## Other Vaginal Infections

These are infections that are **NOT** sexually transmitted but can also cause changes in the vaginal discharge.

- **Bacterial vaginosis** causes a thin, fishy smelling discharge. If untreated, there is a slight risk of pelvic infection and problems during pregnancy. It is treated with oral antibiotics.
- **Vaginal candidiasis (thrush)** is caused by a fungus that causes vaginal itching, redness and swelling with a thick yellow-white discharge. It is treated with anti-fungal medication.

## *Can STIs affect pregnancy?*

STIs can cause many of the same health problems in pregnant women as in women who are not pregnant. However, having an STI can also hurt the unborn baby's health. It may cause:

- Premature labour
- Long-term developmental and health problems in children
- Infection in the uterus after birth

## *What should a woman do if she has an STI?*

If one thinks they may have been exposed to STI or have any of the symptoms, one can visit the DSC Clinic for a sexual health screening.

If you have been diagnosed with any STI, avoid all kinds of sexual activity until you have completed treatment. With some types of STIs, your sexual partner(s) also need to be treated before you resume sexual activity.

Do also consume your medication consistently and as prescribed.

## *Pap Smear*

A Pap smear is a screening test for cancer of the cervix. It checks for early changes in the cells of your cervix that can lead to cervical cancer. If cancer is detected and treated early, treatment will be more effective.

A speculum will be inserted into your vagina and a sample of your cervical cells will be taken using a cervical brush. This sample will be sent to the laboratory for analysis.

## *Who should go for a Pap smear?*

All women from the age of 25 through to 69 who have ever had sex should have a Pap smear once every 3 years. More frequent Pap smears may be needed if you have had a previous abnormal test. To determine this, women should visit their doctors for advice on the frequency of Pap smears.

A good time to have a Pap smear is when the woman is not on her period. To avoid washing away or hiding abnormal cells, women are advised to avoid having sex, douching, or applying vaginal medicines or spermicidal gels at least 2 days before their Pap smear test.

## *HPV Vaccination*

Abnormal Pap smear results can be due to HPV infection, which can be prevented with vaccination. Females between the ages of 9 and 26 are highly recommended to be vaccinated against HPV, whether or not you are sexually active.

The vaccination will also benefit women up to 45 years old and even if one has or has had genital warts or HPV infection. The vaccination protects a woman from the HPV types that she does not already have. To determine your suitability for the vaccination, feel free to discuss with your doctor or gynaecologist.

DSC Clinic offers 1 type of HPV vaccination (Gardasil).

## *Reach Out to Us*

If you still have queries, feel free to call us at the following numbers:

**HIV/STI Hotline (8am – 5pm)**

1800 252 1324

**Health Info Recorded Hotline (24 hours)**

+65 6295 2944

**Appointments**

+65 6293 9648

You may also visit [www.dsc-clinic.sg](http://www.dsc-clinic.sg) for more information, or find us at the DSC Clinic, 31 Kelantan Lane #01-16 S(200031).

## *Disclaimer*

We have attempted to provide full, accurate, and up-to-date information in this patient information leaflet, based on current medical evidence and opinion. However, information and advice may vary from different sources and over time. If you have any further questions, do see your doctor or healthcare provider.