

Sexually transmitted & blood-borne infections

STI or STD?

Sexual health language has changed in recent years – sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are now more commonly referred to as sexually transmitted infections (STIs). STI is more encompassing term, especially for infections that may be asymptomatic. STBBIs, sexually transmitted and blood borne infections, goes one step further – this term broadens the perception of sexual health to include infections that are sexually transmitted (ie: chlamydia) and/or transmitted through blood (ie: HIV).

There are many different conditions that fall under the umbrella of STBBIs, this fact sheet will focus on chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and human papillomavirus (HPV).

This fact sheet will also include some information on common conditions that are not sexually transmitted but can still contribute to your overall sexual wellbeing.

How often should I get tested?

Health Canada recommends all individuals under 25 should be offered testing for STBBI at least once a year. STBBI screening includes tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis and HIV. If you are over 25 you will be offered annual screening if you are a transgender person, gay, bisexual, or a man who has sex with men. You may also be offered an annual screening depending on other risk factors.¹

Why are shame and sexuality linked?

Sex and sexuality are often associated with shame, especially for women. Virginity has long been used as an inappropriate marker of a woman's worth in society. While the notion that women should 'protect' their bodies and 'hide' their sexuality has started to shift, many women still struggle to overcome the longstanding stigma surrounding sex. This shame often precludes women from talking about sex when things are going right, let alone when things go wrong. Contracting an STBBI is often felt to be humiliating and many women delay testing and treatment to avoid judgement.

Thankfully, conversations about sex are changing; the World Health Organization recently updated its definition of sexual health to include a focus on sex positivity and inclusive sexual education.

Your sexual health deserves as much care and attention as your physical and mental health. It's important to encourage open conversations about safe sex and educate yourself on how to prioritize your sexual health.

More than 1 million STBBI's are acquired every day worldwide.²

Do I have to tell my partner?

You must notify your sexual partner(s) if you receive a diagnosis of any STBBI. This gives everyone an opportunity for timely testing and treatment to help prevent further spread. If you're uncomfortable notifying your partner(s), ask your health care provider or local public health unit for assistance.

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most commonly reported STBBI in Canada with a 26% increase in cases over the last 10 years.³

This infection is caused by the chlamydia trachomatis bacteria spread through condomless oral, vaginal and anal sexual contact. Chlamydia is often referred to as a 'silent condition' because infected individuals very rarely report any symptoms. Although chlamydia responds well to antibiotics when diagnosed early, in the absence of symptoms, many individuals will remain unaware of their condition until more serious problems arise. If left untreated, chlamydia can progress to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) as the bacteria spreads to the internal reproductive organs leading to inflammation, scarring and potential infertility.

Symptoms

Asymptomatic

70% of infected women have no symptoms and are unaware of their condition.¹

Abnormal bleeding

- Bleeding between periods
- Bleeding after sex

Abnormal discharge

- Increased vaginal discharge
- Foul-smelling or blood-tinged

Pain

- Pain/burning with urination
- Pain in lower abdomen

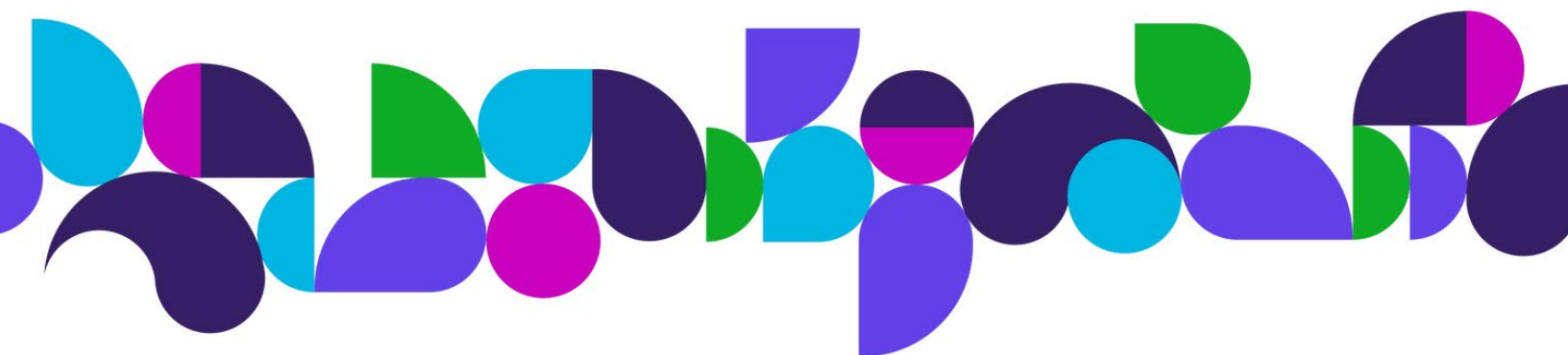
Diagnosis

Testing for chlamydia involves a urine sample and a swab of your vagina and/or mouth and/or anus.

Treatment

Chlamydia can be cured with antibiotics. Even after a chlamydia infection, it is still possible to contract the bacteria again.

For up to 40% of infected women, untreated chlamydia can progress to pelvic inflammatory disease.¹



Gonorrhea

In Canada, the rate of gonorrhea infection has increased by 181% over the last 10 years.³

Gonorrhea is another bacterial STBBI that often occurs at the same time as chlamydia. As you can see from the symptoms below, gonorrhea and chlamydia present very similarly, therefore the only way to accurately distinguish between the two is through testing. Commonly known as 'the clap', gonorrhea infection is transmitted during condomless oral, vaginal and anal sexual activity. If left untreated, gonorrhea is also known to progress to PID.

In 2020, the WHO estimated 82.4 million new infections with gonorrhea among adults aged 15 to 49 years.²

Symptoms

Asymptomatic

Most women with gonorrhea will be completely asymptomatic.

Abnormal bleeding

- Bleeding between periods
- Bleeding after sex

Abnormal discharge

- Increased vaginal discharge
- Foul-smelling or blood-tinged

Pain

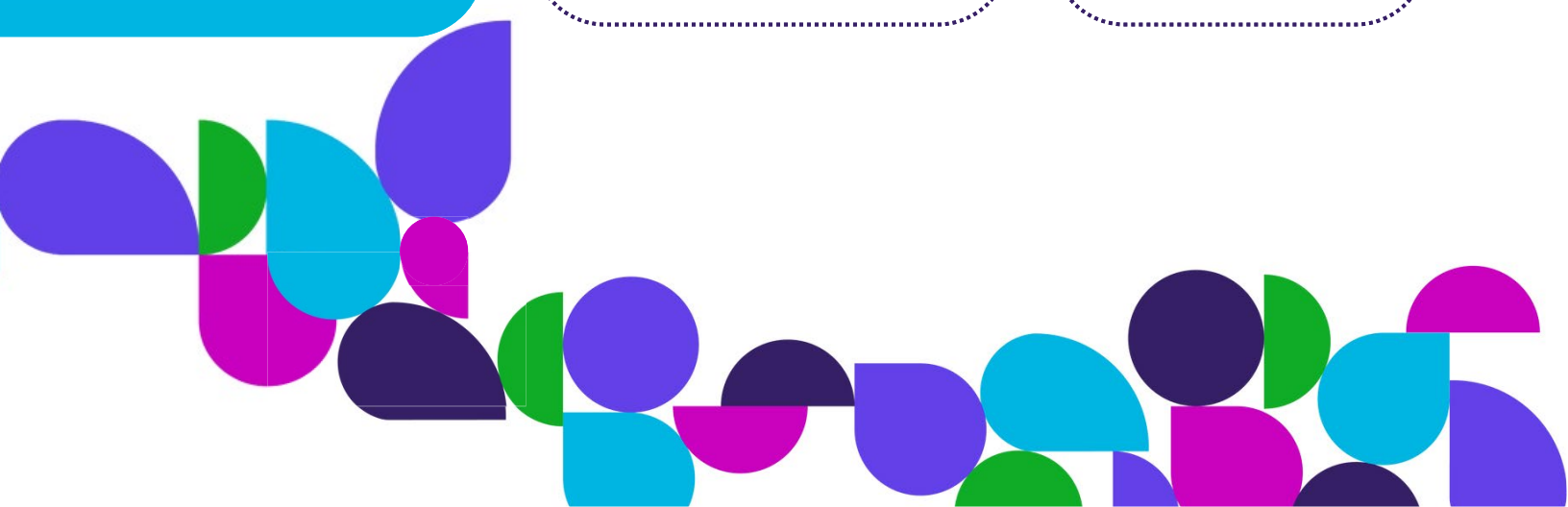
- Pain/burning with urination
- Pain in lower abdomen

Diagnosis

Testing for gonorrhea involves a urine sample and a swab of your cervix and/or mouth and/or anus.

Treatment

Gonorrhea can be cured with antibiotics. Unfortunately, gonorrhea is becoming increasingly resistant to antibiotics and may require repeated treatment.



Syphilis

In Canada, the rate of syphilis infection has increased by 389% over the last 10 years.³

Syphilis is a bacterial STBBI transmitted during condomless oral, vaginal and anal sexual activity. Syphilis also poses a very serious health threat during pregnancy and is associated with serious fetal complications and miscarriage. All women who are planning pregnancy or recently pregnant will be tested, and if necessary, treated for syphilis as soon as possible. Syphilis has an unusual progression in comparison to chlamydia and gonorrhea. There are four phases (as described below) each with its own unique symptoms. It's important to note that individuals with syphilis are only infectious during the primary, secondary and early latent stage, even without formal treatment.

Symptoms

1. Primary stage

One or more painful sores (called 'chancres') develop 10-90 days after exposure and typically go away in a few weeks - with or without treatment.

2. Abnormal bleeding

Without treatment, syphilis will enter the secondary stage, characterized by a wide-spread rash and more painful sores.

3. Latent stage

Latent syphilis can remain dormant in the body for over 30 years without any symptoms. In some cases, latent syphilis resolves on its own, in others, it progresses to a more serious fourth stage.

4. Tertiary stage

During the tertiary stage, syphilis can often result in serious damage to the internal organs such as the heart, lungs and brain.

Diagnosis

Testing for syphilis involves a blood test and a swab of your sore(s).

Treatment

Syphilis can be cured with antibiotics. Once you have been treated, you will need to go for follow-up blood tests to ensure the infection is gone.

The transmission rate of syphilis during the infectious stages is 64% per sexual partner.⁴

HIV

Approximately 7 Canadians are newly diagnosed with HIV every day.⁵

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. HIV is spread both sexually and through the blood; unprotected sexual activity, contact with infected blood or blood products and sharing invasive drug equipment with someone who has HIV, are possible methods of transmission.

There is a common misconception that HIV can be spread through any kind of physical contact, such as hugging, kissing or shaking hands, but this is entirely untrue. Similar to syphilis, HIV also follows an unusual progression, often asymptomatic for many years before signs of immune system dysfunction appear.

Symptoms

Early infection

- Mild flu-like symptoms, such as fever, cough and sore throat, 2 to 4 weeks after exposure.

Late infection

- If left untreated, can compromise immune system and increase the risk of life-threatening infections.

Treatment

Treatment of HIV has improved dramatically over the last 10 years. There are highly effective specialized treatments to manage HIV infection, help lower the levels of HIV in the body and improve immune system function.

Diagnosis

Testing for HIV involves a blood test. If you have confirmed exposure to HIV, you can seek medical attention prior to testing for an immediate PEP prescription.

PEP vs. PrEP

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is an anti-retroviral (anti-HIV) drug used to help prevent HIV transmission in recently exposed individuals. Anyone who thinks they may have been exposed to HIV should contact their doctor for an immediate prescription.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is an anti-retroviral (anti-HIV) drug used to help prevent HIV transmission in people at high risk for HIV infection. High risk individuals include (but are not limited to):

- Transgender women who report condomless sex
- Any person with a high HIV risk score
- Any person who has condomless sex with a partner who has untreated HIV
- Any person who shares injection drug use equipment



HIV

Over 75% of sexually active adults will develop at least one HPV infection during their lifetime.⁶

Human Papillomavirus (HPV) is a group of infections made up of over one-hundred different viral strains. Some strains are more commonly associated with cold sores or genital warts while others have been found to increase your risk of certain cancers. All forms of HPV are spread through unprotected sexual contact and skin-to-skin exposure.

The best way to mitigate your risk of HPV infection is to get vaccinated. HPV vaccines are offered to all school-aged children across Canada although many adults will be eligible for vaccination if requested.

Symptoms

Asymptomatic

Most people infected with HPV will not have any symptoms.

Warts

HPV can lead to warts anywhere on the body depending on the strain and method of transmission. If HPV is transmitted via sexual contact, about 1% of people may develop painless 'cauliflower' overgrowths of skin - known as genital warts.

Treatment

While HPV itself does not have any formal treatment, symptoms associated with HPV (ie: genital warts) can be managed with topical ointments, cryotherapy, laser therapy and minimally invasive removal.


Diagnosis

Testing for HPV involves a cervical swab, similar to a Pap test. This test detects 'high-risk' HPV strains that have been linked to cervical cancer. A positive result does not mean you have cancer, but you may need further testing and closer follow-up to help mitigate your risk.

HPV16 and HPV18 are the most common high-risk strains, accounting for 70% of cervical cancer cases.⁷

Cervical cancer

Cervical cancer is very closely linked with human papillomavirus (HPV) infection. See our cervical cancer fact sheet for more information.



Vaginal Microbiome

In recent years, public interest and awareness of the gut microbiome has grown remarkably. Now more than ever, people are embracing the link between gut health and greater physical and mental wellbeing.

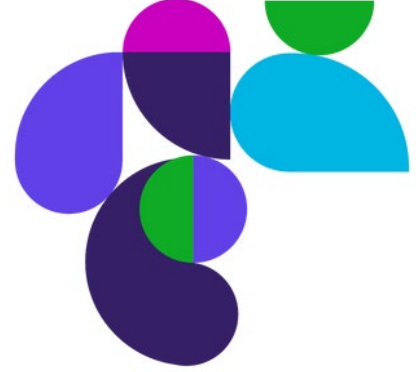
Interestingly, the vaginal microbiome has received very little attention in comparison, in fact many people have probably never even appreciated its existence. The vaginal microbiome is a dynamic environment of tiny bacteria that play a huge role in maintaining your reproductive and general health. Just as the gut microbiome can be easily influenced by diet and medication, the vaginal microbiome is very sensitive to changes in its environment, such as sexual activity, pregnancy, contraception use, hormone levels and your menstrual cycle.

The following conditions result from a disruption of the vaginal microbiome. It's important to note that neither bacterial vaginosis nor vaginal yeast infections are STBBIs. These conditions are key to understanding sexual health and can be easily influenced by previous STBBI infection, antibiotic use or even sexual activity in the absence of any infection at all.

75% of women will have a vaginal yeast infection at least once in their life.⁸

	Bacterial Vaginosis	Yeast Infection
Background	Bacterial Vaginosis (BV) is caused an imbalance of 'good' and 'harmful' bacteria in the vagina.	Vaginal yeast infections are caused by an overgrowth of the candida albicans fungus that naturally occurs in your vagina.
Symptoms	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thin gray/white vaginal discharge• Vaginal itching or burning• Burning when passing urine• Foul-smelling 'fishy' vaginal odour	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Thick 'cottage-cheese' vaginal discharge• Vaginal itch or burning• Burning when passing urine• Pain or discomfort during sexual contact
Treatment	Antibiotic vaginal gels, tablets or creams.	Anti-fungal vaginal gels, tablets or creams.

Some treatment options may be available over the counter and should be discussed with your pharmacist before use.



How can Teladoc Health help?

At Teladoc Health, we appreciate that sexual health can be difficult for some women to talk about. We are here to help you find discrete, judgement-free care with one of our world-class experts.

Our Find a Doctor service can locate a primary care provider or specialist who is available to carry out testing for STBIs and provide more information on PEP and PrEP.

If you have received a diagnosis for an STBI and have questions about next steps or would like a second opinion, our Expert Medical Opinion team can locate a specialist to review your case.

This guide is not meant to provide medical advice or service and should not be construed as the professional advice of Teladoc Health. As such, Teladoc Health does not guarantee or assume responsibility for the correctness of the information or its applicability regarding any specific factual situation. Personal health problems should be brought to the attention of physicians and appropriate health care professionals.

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Learn more at TeladocHealth.ca

About Teladoc Health: Teladoc Health is empowering all people everywhere to live healthier lives by transforming the healthcare experience. Recognized as the world leader in whole-person virtual care, Teladoc Health leverages clinical expertise, advanced technology and actionable data insights to meet the evolving needs of consumers and healthcare professionals.

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